

Holding church, academy and society together

Joanna Leidenhag in conversation with David Fergusson

Dr Joanna Leidenhag is Lecturer in Theology and Liberal Arts at the University of Leeds. She completed her PhD at the University of Edinburgh under the supervisor of Prof Fergusson and worked at the University of St Andrews for three years before moving to Leeds.

Prof David Fergusson is Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. Prior to taking up his current post, he was Chair of Divinity (2000–2021) and Principal of New College (2008–2018) at the University of Edinburgh, and Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen (1990–2000). Prof Fergusson is ordained in the Church of Scotland and currently serves as Dean of the Chapel Royal, which ministers to the royal household. With Professor Bill Shaw, he was involved in the initiative that led to the founding of Theology in Scotland and served as the first chair of the editorial board (1993–2009).



Joanna Leidenhag: Welcome, David. And many congratulations on your move to Cambridge, almost a year ago now, after working as a theologian and minister in Scotland for over 30 years. This late career move must have prompted you to reflect on your eminent career. I'm wondering if you can cast your mind back to the beginning of that journey. What drew you to study philosophy and theology as a young man?

David Fergusson: My initial stimulus came from Kerr Spiers, my minister in Glasgow. He put a variety of theological books into my teenage hands – Barth, Bultmann, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and Macquarrie all spring to mind, though I'm sure that my understanding of their work was pretty poor at that time.

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JL: I suppose what makes these theologians ‘the greats’ of the tradition is just that feeling that they have to be returned to many times and explored in conversation with others, in order to understand them. It sounds like your interest in theology started in those tender teenage years. But have you ever thought about doing anything else with your life? Did you have any other dreams as a boy?

DF: My father was a doctor and I imagined myself following a similar career path until I sensed a call to ministry. My early intellectual interests may have inclined more towards the humanities than the sciences, especially to literature and history. Training for ministry was an unlikely form of rebellion, though my parents were always supportive. After I matriculated as an Arts student at Glasgow University, I discovered an interest in philosophy; this has never deserted me.

JL: I certainly resonant with that as my mother was a doctor as well. You’ve already hinted that the pursuit of theology includes within it an interest in other humanities subjects, literature, history and philosophy in particular. This seems to have been borne out across your career, in how you’ve written books on a number of different topics, including creation, providence, and the relationship between the church and the state. How do you choose what to focus your research on?

DF: As a theologian, I’ve been something of a general practitioner! Most of my work has been occasional and contextual. For example, I have long been exercised by the dramatic changes in the relationship of church to society that have taken place during my own lifetime.¹ *Faith and Its Critics* (2009) was based on my Glasgow Gifford Lectures; this work was partly a response to growing secularisation and scepticism.² My writing on creation initially emerged from an invitation by Mike Mair and Bob Brown to participate in a Sunday

¹ David A. S. Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

² David A. S. Fergusson, *Faith and Its Critics: A Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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evening study group in the mid-90s for their Aberdeen congregations. In these encounters, I came to realise that this was a rich though neglected subject. Increasingly, it became a focus of my teaching and was the chosen subject for the Cunningham Lectures at New College (1996).³ My initial reflections on providence were stimulated by J. R. Lucas's graduate seminars in Oxford during the early 1980s; this subject often resurfaced through pastoral experiences. Though I offered occasional musings on the subject, I was unable to complete a book until more than thirty years later.⁴

JL: Wow, these are great examples of how one inspiring seminar or one invitation to speak on something can be a small seed that inspires years of work and grows into a much larger project. What about your current project? I believe you're currently working on a one-volume systematic theology. How would you describe the nature of this task, and who is the intended audience for this book?

DF: This remains a work in progress and there is some way to go. The task is to write concisely and clearly, to speak to a context in which faith has become an 'embattled option' (Charles Taylor),⁵ and to show some awareness of the challenges and opportunities offered by comparative theology and world Christianity. It is likely to be a work that displays some traditional features, but which will be judged heterodox in other respects, particularly with respect to my reading of the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology. My theology has probably shifted in its approach from a Barthian to a more Schleiermacherian emphasis, though that comment requires some nuancing. For example, Barth's stronger personalism in relation to the doctrine of God still seems more satisfactory to me. I am also keen to write in a way that eschews the curricular division between systematic, practical, and pastoral theology. We'll see how successful this proves.

³ David A. S. Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation* (London: SPCK, 1998). See also, David Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014).

⁴ David A. S. Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.



JL: Academia is an international community, and I see Canadian, Swiss and German names, as well as the context of comparative and world Christianity in your previous answers. But you've also recently edited a multi-volume series on the history of Scottish theology, and frequently use Scottish theologians in your work. Is this just national bias, or do you think there is something distinctive about Scottish theology that needs to be communicated to a wider audience?

DF: I hope that it's borne less from national bias and more from grateful appreciation of my own context. 'Home is where we start from ...' (T. S. Eliot).⁶ I had originally aspired to write a history of Scottish theology based on my teaching of the subject – Alec Cheyne once encouraged me to attempt this. But I quickly came to realise that it was foolish to pretend to comprehend the entire field. The co-edited three-volume *History of Scottish Theology* was the outcome, a multi-authored work by a diversity of experts, many from outside Scotland, who offered chronological coverage of the main movements, thinkers, and trends.⁷ It was a team effort, and I enjoyed my editorial collaboration with Mark Elliott. But there is much more work to do, and we hope that our efforts will encourage another generation to continue the study of theologies and theologians that have emerged on Scottish soil. We need a new edition of the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, and I'm pleased to learn that work on this is already underway. I might add that my recent move to Cambridge is already providing a welcome opportunity to engage in greater depth with Anglican theology.

JL: You say that there is much more work to do and give a hint as to what some of this might look like. More widely, what do you hope for the

⁶ T. S. Eliot, "East Coker", *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, [1944] 2001), pt. 5.

⁷ *The History of Scottish Theology. Volume 1: Celtic Origins to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); *The History of Scottish Theology. Volume 2: From the Early Enlightenment to the Late Victorian Era*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); *The History of Scottish Theology. Volume 3: The Long Twentieth Century*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).



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future of Scottish theology?

DF: Theology in Scotland has become more ecumenical, international, and multi-faith. These are exciting and welcome developments that will surely continue. The Scottish Divinity Schools remain amongst the strongest in Europe. But it would be disappointing if theology became disconnected from the life of the Scottish churches and our society. So, I hope for renewed theological zest within our churches matched by the production of writing that is accessible, rigorous, and pastorally attuned. We need to stop addressing only a narrow scholarly guild. Incidentally, I'd be even more disappointed if colleagues in other areas of the academy, especially in our Divinity Schools, were to ignore or condescend towards the ineluctable and normative questions explored by theology.

JL: I couldn't agree more, and I hope that journals like *Theology in Scotland* give a forum for more of this accessible theological writing. Is there a person (living, dead, or even fictional) that you particularly admire? Maybe someone who was able to bridge both church and academic contexts?

DF: I'm not sure that I can single out any individual. Perhaps it would be one of the many fascinating occupants of my Edinburgh chair or a former teacher with whom I wish still to converse. I continually use John Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer*, the best-selling work of any Scottish theologian, and I often wonder what made him tick as a scholar, teacher, and preacher.⁸ I regret that I did not know him – he retired the year I was born. Baillie has become for me the 'familiar compound ghost' of Eliot's "Little Gidding".⁹

JL: I bought Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer* on your recommendation a few years back myself. If you were to recommend one book to the

⁸ John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Scribner, [1949] 2014). Readers interested further in the work of John and Donald Baillie might note that David has also edited a collection of essays of these two remarkable Scottish Churchmen. *Christ, Church, and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie*, ed. David Fergusson (London: T&T Clark, [1993], 2004).

⁹ Eliot, "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*, pt. 2.



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readers of this interview, what would it be?

DF: Hendrikus Berkhof's single volume *Christian Faith* is one of the most underrated works of the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Neither liberal nor conservative, his work resists easy categorisation; perhaps this is why he always surprises. His writing is informed not only by the study of Scripture and the history of theology, but also by a refreshing willingness to reconstruct established positions. It has remained one of my 'go to' books in over thirty years of teaching. I never fail to learn from him.

JL: And I never fail to learn from our conversations, David. I often find myself remembering pieces of advice, or probing questions you asked me, during my time as your PhD student. Thank you for letting *me* ask the questions this time!

DF: I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak, Joanna. May *Theology in Scotland* continue to flourish in every way!

¹⁰ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

