

*Faith and the Fourth Gospel: A Conversation with Teresa Morgan\**

Abstract: In *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* Teresa Morgan brings a classicist's sensitivities to a subject that lies at the heart of the New Testament but that is often taken as self-evident. This paper engages in a conversation with its insights, with particular reference to the Johannine literature. It suggests that more nuancing might be needed, not least from a recognition of the demands of the genre of the Gospel, but also finds much to provoke further reflection.

Keywords: John; Fourth Gospel; believe; Christology; Teresa Morgan; determinism.

This very learned and deeply insightful book is the product of a long period of reading, reflection and discussion, intersecting, sometimes more by implication than explicitly, with a number of recent debates in classical as well as religious studies concerning the nature and definition of 'religion', and whether the emergence of Christianity signalled a major change.<sup>1</sup> In the background of such debates has been the charge that the terminology and conceptual framework of Christianity, and particularly its core notion of 'faith', have had a distorting effect on the analysis of ancient religion, not only seeking to impose on it categories that are intrinsically alien, but in so doing making value judgements that in the past have served a triumphalist interpretation of the eventual 'success' of Christianity. However, rather than repeat the now-common riposte that in the ancient world there was no such phenomenon as religion conceived as a separate sphere of life, or that the association of religion with a personal, emotional commitment is a conceit of a post-Kantian age, Morgan seeks to recover the language of 'faith' (or, to avoid the distortions of all translations, *pistis*), locating it firmly in relationships between beings whether conceived of as human or as divine. In so doing she also exposes the over-simplifications that draw dividing lines between propositional belief, conviction, commitment, reliability and trust, nuancing without obfuscating the intellectual, conceptual and relational dynamics involved in all of these.

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\* Corresponding author: Judith M. Lieu, Faculty of Divinity, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9BS, UK. [jml68@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jml68@cam.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of transparency I should acknowledge that I contributed a paper on the New Testament and the Johannine writings to a seminar on this theme organised by Prof. Morgan in 2006, the proceedings of which eventually were not published. There seems to be an overlooked reference to the aborted volume at Morgan 2015: 399 n. 33: 'Lieu (forthcoming)!'.

As in her previous work on popular morality (2007), Morgan brings the breadth of reading and intimate knowledge of contemporary context of the classicist, but here she also writes as someone who has (?willingly) read herself into the bewildering morass of scholarship on the New Testament and early Christianity, which, for good or ill, conventionally frames its questions and investigations in somewhat different ways. This is of course much to be welcomed, and it represents just one of the ways in which classicists, scholars of late antiquity, and scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity, as well as of early Judaism, are now increasingly engaging with each other. In some cases the goal and outcome of such engagement is to embed early Christianity fully in the religious dynamics of the ancient mediterranean world, in others it is to understand the emergence of early Christianity within and but also from out of its social and conceptual environment. This book belongs to the latter model — hence Plutarch, and even the age of Libanius (p. 140), belong in the chapters that precede those on Christianity, which then live and operate within their own internal dynamics. Some will be anxious about the ancestry of such an approach in the classic ‘word studies’ model, typified by *TDNT* and by countless PhD theses; part of Morgan’s aim is to avoid the self-fulfilling impetus of such endeavours.

To this end, and driven by the ambition of the project, Morgan pursues a close reading of the texts themselves, as she encounters them: references to commentaries tend to be generic and not brought into her engagement with the text. At times this is frustrating for the reader accustomed to work as an exegete, considering multiple interpretive possibilities, while at others it usefully provokes the question whether we have begun to be blind to the obvious or natural way of reading. Yet balancing this is the different jolt when at regular moments the reading suggests the sympathy of an ‘insider’ for whom the Christian stories and their regular reading ‘in-house’ are familiar, especially within an accepted doctrinal framework.<sup>2</sup> At times this can make it difficult to discern whether a comment is analytical or theological; so, in emphasizing the ultimately communal dimension of *pistis/fides*, ‘This is true not least for followers of Christ, for whom the *pistis* of any individual towards God and Christ is only possible because of the actions of God and Christ on behalf of all’ (p. 483):

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Morgan 2015: 416-17 on ‘consequentialism’ — i.e. faith understood as justified by its consequences: ‘The fact that early Christians could appeal to the future’ (i.e. eschatology) ‘to vindicate their *pistis* while it *was* still the future shows, by the riskiness of the assertion, its sincerity, and shows that such sincerity could appeal to those to whom they preached’.

is this a reference to the perception of the New Testament, or of Paul, or is it simply the case? At the same time, one of Morgan's driving concerns and also one of her important contributions is the avoidance of interpretations or translations that reflect contemporary Christian or religious experience and are alien to the ancient one: so she resists translating *hē pistis* as "the faith", meaning something close to what modern Christians might mean by "the Christian faith" or "the Christian religion": the complex of doctrines, attitudes, practices, sense of community, and more which makes up a modern worshipper's understanding of religion'; however, when she goes on to suggest what it does mean it sounds very close to what some contemporary Christians do indeed mean, namely a reification of "the relationship of trust" or "the bond of trust" between God, Christ, and the faithful' (pp. 264, 267).

Morgan's repeated refrain is that 'it is hard not to be aware already of rather more similarities between Graeco-Roman and Jewish or Christian *mentalité* than might have been expected'. No doubt this will be challenging to those who emphasise 'uniqueness' as defining Christianity, and for whom 'faith' is in a number of ways the emblem of that uniqueness.<sup>3</sup> (Although they will be reassured by the conclusion that 'Paul and other New Testament writers virtually redefine *pistis* as a divine-human relationship without an intra-human analogue' [p. 306]). For Morgan any expectation of uniqueness also would be a 'methodologically unsound' principle. However, if that were all that could be said perhaps the exercise would be less fruitful, nor would it address the density of *pistis* language across a range of early Christian sources. As the book progresses she does allow that 'in some ways Christian uses of *pistis* language do evolve, even within the period of the New Testament writings' (p. 214). Some readers will find a problem here, or perhaps one of a number of echoes of an approach that for some is equally 'methodologically unsound'. Does the New Testament represent the field within which ideas evolve(d) or is it a haphazard collection of writings with individual semantic worlds? Is the collection of New Testament writings necessarily the best place to start to understand early Christian thought, in so far as it is set apart not by date or authorship but by later ecclesiastical process? Do these writings, exclusively and as a group, represent beyond their particularity something that might be used to construct the history of a concept?

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<sup>3</sup> See, and contrast with Morgan's analysis, Jensen 2004, which eschews any historical contextualisation.

The language of evolution suggests that the answer is yes, but the grounds are not made explicit, and on occasion there is a hint of apologetic: although Morgan recognizes problems of dating Paul's letters, she does not think these 'render it impossible in principle ... that distinctive features' (of Galatians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon) 'mark an evolution in Paul's thought' (pp. 263, 267).<sup>4</sup> More positively this then leads to the suggestion that 'the process of developing this model also leads Paul to develop his use of *pistis* in some other passages: not dramatically, but in ways which will significantly shape later Christian thinking' (p. 305). A similar conclusion comes when she concludes that 'the writer' of 1 John 5.4-5 is 'using *pistis* here, intentionally or accidentally, to mean something close to *fides quae*: the propositional content of what we believe. If so, this is a significant evolution in the treatment of *pistis*, and the earliest surviving use of it in a sense which will become increasingly important to Christians of later centuries' (p. 440-41). Perhaps a desire for an 'evolution' that will therefore constrain excessive variety is also betrayed by the footnote that while John is not 'usually thought' to have known Paul's letters, he 'could have known of Pauline usages in communities of Asia Minor' (p. 396 n. 13). Perhaps. Yet how can we use the language of development or evolution unless we know what these texts represent, when they are to be dated, and what is their relationship with each other?

In what follows this review will concentrate on the chapter (pp. 394-443) on the Johannine corpus, which includes Revelation. Again, like the organisation of the other chapters, this betrays the heritage of older ways of managing the New Testament, as too does the combination of the acknowledgement that the current consensus is for different authorship, with comments like 'both the gospel and Revelation' (p. 396), or '1 John follows the gospel more nearly than Revelation' (p. 438). However, Morgan does not address directly debates about the conceptual background of John, especially those that would argue for a more philosophically-oriented one.<sup>5</sup> Within the structure of the book what has preceded the New Testament has been the Septuagint, and if anything informs their ideas it will be this: 'Dialogue with Septuagintal uses of *pisteuein*, which would have been clearly audible in a (dominantly) Jewish-Christian community

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<sup>4</sup> This stands in tension with Morgan 2015: 223 n. 59, where Phil. 2.7-8 is described as 'a later letter (though not necessarily ... a later stratum of tradition)'.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan also does not consider whether John's language is polemical, not just in a Jewish framework but in an imperial one.

like John's, may therefore be another reason for John's extensive use of the verb, though again it does not explain why he does not use *pistis* at all' (p. 397).<sup>6</sup>

Morgan works, appropriately, with the 'final form' of text, although she does on occasion appeal to editorial layers to solve problems: for example, she sees a developed interest in 'pre-election' and 'ferocious attacks on "the Jews"', as characteristic of later stages, and the fear and doubt of John 6.16-21; 14.1; 20.24-25, as remnants of 'earlier versions' (pp. 419, 421-22, 424); there is a danger of circularity here, and it might be better simply to allow the inconsistencies to stand. More important is the limited attention to how the literary character and form of the text intersects with its language. That John takes the literary form of a narrative Gospel, concerned with specifics of time, place, and plot, yet dominated by Jesus as the primary speaker, should lie at the heart of any attempt at its interpretation. The majority of the uses of the verb *pisteuein* are by Jesus and the narrator (85/98), of which two thirds are by Jesus — although in practice it is difficult to distinguish between Jesus and the narrator; for example, it is unclear at what point in the discourse beginning in John 3.10 Jesus stops speaking, and whether the language of belief 'in the son' in John 3.15-19 is on Jesus' or the narrator' lips.

Morgan's default instinct is to treat the Gospel as a quasi-reported account of Jesus' ministry, so that there are two levels of potential faith to be explored: the response of Jesus' 'historical' immediate contemporaries in the story, and that of those who are addressed by this story, whether they are believers or non-believers.<sup>7</sup> This becomes explicit, for example, in the explanation (pp. 404-5) that the Gospel writers have to describe Jesus' contemporaries as accepting miracles as genuine so as to avoid giving their own hearers (or the hearers of Christian preaching) the option of rejecting them as fraudulent: the only issue can be the source of Jesus' power. Yet on this understanding the Gospel narratives act largely as a means of extending the effect of Jesus' ministry rather than as functioning in an entirely different way, 'post-resurrection'. So, for example,

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<sup>6</sup> See the earlier comment on p. 204, 'The Septuagint does not use *hoi pisteuontes* to mean the Israelites as a group, in the way the New Testament will use it to mean followers of Christ, but these passages confirm at least that the idea of using *hoi pisteuontes* to identify a group would not have been absolutely strange to first-century Jews'.

<sup>7</sup> I am not suggesting that Morgan takes them as factually correct but treats the characters as having intentions outside what the narrative tells, so that a degree of consistent realism is to be expected, or the story is retold and explained to achieve this. The question of genre is raised but set aside on pp. 347-48.

'their remembering is itself a confirmation of their earlier trust, which has been justified after the resurrection' (p. 415, on John 2.22). Consequently, there is rather less reflection on the effect of the tensive relationship created by the characteristic Johannine 'remembering', and by the retrojection on to the ministry of Jesus of the convictions and insights of a later time, a time which is characterized by the absence of Jesus. To some extent this is qualified by the discussion at the end of the chapter (pp. 433-35) which recognizes that the Gospel does combine 'multiple, sometimes parallel, often intersecting stories', and which goes on to refer to the 'narrative structure or language game of the Johannine community'; however, it is not evident that the implications of this, and of the scholarly debates to which reference might have been made, have been fully absorbed in the main substance of the chapter. Indeed, the point could be pushed further: the 'language game' does not belong to the (hypothetical) Johannine community but to the text before us in its self-conscious textuality: 'these things are written (*gegraptai*) that you may believe' (20.31) forces the question, 'How are they written?'

The issue is exemplified in the discussion of John's 'signs', which largely aligns them with broader gospel miracle tradition, under the heading of 'reasons to believe'. The focus is therefore on their evidential function, even if not all who respond understand that of which they are evidence; thus the narratives are treated as quasi-reportage with less attention to their literary framing and function: the comment, 'After Jesus turns water into wine at Cana the disciples are said to have believed (*episteusan*) in him (2.11), despite the fact that they presumptively put their trust in Jesus when they began to follow him' (p. 406), sees the issue as one of potential growth in believing but ignores the characteristically Johannine 'he manifested his glory', which takes the story onto a very different level within the worldview of the Gospel. Morgan recognises that John regards faith in signs as ultimately limited but she understands this as because people may not draw the full appropriate conclusions: 2.23-25 is explained, 'There is no indication that their trust/belief is not genuine, but we infer that it is weak' (p. 409).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, 4.48 is interpreted as directed to the Galileans because of the plural 'you', thus exculpating the official, even though the words are introduced, 'Jesus said to him' (pp. 407, 409).<sup>9</sup> Morgan detects a

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Morgan 2015: 408: 'those who trust/believe as a result of a sign can be criticized by Jesus for their lack of understanding' (cf. 3.10) but 'they are never rejected or told that they are not among the elect' (cf. below).

<sup>9</sup> This is an example of the attempt to find a historically realistic consistency in the narrative as quasi-reportage.

development in the man's faith ... 'to trusting/ believing his word to trusting/ believing in him with full confidence' (p. 407), but in so doing misses the resonances of the characteristically Johannine use of the singular *logos* (cf. 4.41), and of the absolute use of the verb *pisteuein* in v. 53. Yet much Johannine study of the 'signs' would swiftly look beyond the miraculous, to reflect on the resonances of the language of 'signs' itself; in particular, John's 'signs' have been located both within the Gospel's self-referential ambiguity about 'seeing' (1.14; 20.29), and even more within the wider, perhaps all-embracing, framework of Johannine symbolism, a theme which could be said to be central to the way that John functions and understands both 'seeing' and 'believing' but that is largely ignored in the chapter's discussion.<sup>10</sup>

At the core of the hermeneutical challenge of the Gospel is the centrality of Christology. Morgan swiftly moves to its centrality, therefore, for believing; this in turn generates an overview of some of the focal aspects of John's Christology. Morgan begins by rehearsing the debate over unity versus obedience or subordination in the relationship of the Son to the Father, with reference to the classic studies of Barrett and of Borgen on agency. However, she understands this in dogmatic terms of 'majesty veiled in humility' and not in terms of the nature and demands of the narrative and its symbolic world.<sup>11</sup> Here in particular this feels like reading an 'insider's' unquestioning familiarity with these texts, and also with their heritage in the doctrinal assumptions of later theology: 'Jesus brings humanity to the Father less by representing both God and humanity to one another than by representing God to humanity' (p. 403). 'On the one hand, he is the Word made flesh ... [o]n the other, he is a human being' (p. 411): but the question for Johannine scholars is whether there is a 'one hand ... other hand' about it. So when she says that 'John uses *pisteuein* language to mark either the closeness, even the identity, of God and Jesus, or a combination of their identity and Jesus' obedient subordination to God' (p. 400), she appears unconcerned about the problem this creates as to the referent of 'Jesus' as the figure located in a narrative fixed in time and space: in what sense can one talk about 'identity' between this figure and God, and indeed, is this what the Gospel does? A footnote

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<sup>10</sup> See Lee 2002; Koester 2003.

<sup>11</sup> So also the references to Jesus' 'suffering humanity' (pp. 400-401). Cf. Morgan 2015: 436: John 'uses *pisteuein* not so much to explore the complexity and ambiguity of Jesus' nature and location between God and humanity, especially as people encounter it during his lifetime, as to emphasize at once the unity of Christ with God and his faithful subordination to God': it is unclear here who or what are the referents of 'Jesus' and 'Christ', and how they are being used.

to 8.24, 'if you do not trust/believe (*pisteuein*) that I AM', comments 'in Rabbinic texts "I AM" comes to be used as a name for God in its own right' (p. 400 n. 36), but what the sentence might mean either on the narrative or on any other level is not questioned. In fact, John resists any final propositional assertion: to say that 'John's imagery seems to locate Jesus both as God's instrument (the bread of life) and as indistinguishable from God (resurrection and life itself)' (p. 402) goes far beyond even the (mistaken) charge by the 'Jews' in 5.18.

Morgan rightly recognises the tensions created by Johannine determinism or 'pre-election'. Given how central this is to any exegesis of the Gospel it is surprising to read that '[S]urprisingly little is written on pre-election or predestination in John' (p. 418 n. 110). Much has been written, and the debates on the subject and its intersection with dualism (relegated to a footnote, p. 419 n. 113) might have helpfully informed the section.<sup>12</sup> So too, Morgan rightly sees this as a consequence or expression of Johannine eschatology (pp. 417-18), although the realized eschatology is under-explored; brought together, dualism and eschatology might lead to a deeper engagement with John's 'dualism of decision'. Also needing more consideration here would be the much-discussed 'individualism' of the Gospel: Morgan rightly emphasizes the communal images of the Gospel (pp. 435-36), but she pays less attention to the extensive degree to which 'believing/trusting' is predicated on individuals — not only as characters but in the regular 'the one who ...' — and to the consequences of this for John's thought. Although recent scholarship, especially overshadowed by theories of 'a Johannine community', has focussed on the corporate models, influential voices still argue for the primacy of the individual.<sup>13</sup> Dualism, realized eschatology, an emphasis on the absolute demand on the individual for decision, and determinism, together belong to the same complex of ideas or within the same worldview, and the nature and dynamics of believing constitute the thread that runs through them all.

Perhaps it is the absence of this broader framework that leads Morgan at times to go beyond the Gospel, not least in the regular use of 'the elect': 'The disciples' recognition and acceptance of signs also forms a periodic reaffirmation of their status among the elect and a reminder of what is required of other members of

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<sup>12</sup> To conjure but a few names, Keck, Onuki, Schottroff, Trumbower, Tukasi. John 12.37-43, cited (without vv. 42-43) at p. 419, has provoked a considerable bibliography and much discussion in the commentaries.

<sup>13</sup> Yet some of these could learn much from the nuanced discussion of relationality and interiority (chapter 11).

the elect' (p. 407 n. 64).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, 'Conversely, when Jesus calls people to *pisteuein*, he will not so much invite them to trust/believe *de novo* as call them to recognize whether or not they are among the elect' (p. 423). This 'rigorism' may also be the result of a search for a consistency which can be expressed in logical and consequential terms, but which the Gospel in fact never achieves. The logic leads her to interpret 17.21 as indicating John's 'hope that all people will ultimately be one and everyone among the elect', which she acknowledges to be 'highly anomalous' but does not see how it undermines the very notion of 'being elect' (p. 427 and n. 147).<sup>15</sup> Rather, to attempt (pp. 420-21) to determine where priority lies in the verbs of John 1.10 (receiving, becoming children of God, believing, and having been born) may be to force an answer to a question which is not asked, while also overlooking that the main verb in the sentence is 'he gave'. Morgan's solution to the inconsistencies where this rigor is not sustained is to appeal to earlier traditions that have not been 'fully submerged' and to the pastoral needs of the congregation, when perhaps more could have been achieved by exploring the overarching theological framework of the nature of the revelation of God. Here Bultmann may have offered more provocation to reflection on what is going on in the communication strategy of the Gospel than the brief account (p. 433) allows.

An oft-noted characteristic of the Johannine language of 'believing' is the different constructions accompanying the verb.<sup>16</sup> Morgan rightly rejects the differentiation made by some scholars regarding prepositions or cases following the verb, although she cannot avoid introducing her own: the threefold dative in John 10.37-38 is translated as 'believe me ... believe me ... believe *in* the works' (p. 409). In accordance with her approach of studying the text first, Morgan only comes to this issue relatively late in the chapter (pp. 425-32), where her primary concern is with John's use of 'that' (*hoti*) after *pisteuein*; this sequence also allows her to emphasize that what may appear to be propositional belief is always implicated in and inseparable from the relational dimension of believing which has emerged as the major theme in what precedes. However, the crucial acknowledgement that 'John's Jesus often uses *pisteuein* without an object or a

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<sup>14</sup> See also n. 8 above. In the Johannine literature the noun is only found at 2 John 1, 13 (and Rev. 17.14); the verb is always in the aorist middle with Jesus as its subject (John 6.70; 13.18; 15.16, 19).

<sup>15</sup> Commentators discuss here, and at the parallel at 17.23, whether this is belief/knowledge for salvation or for judgement; so also 8.28, if those who do the 'lifting up' are the Jews; 19.37.

<sup>16</sup> I.e. with *eis* (usually the person but also 'the name'), with the dative, with *hoti*; the text is uncertain at 3.15.

dependent clause, leaving ambiguous, as in the synoptic gospels, what aspect of his identity, status, or activity people are to trust/believe in' is relegated to a footnote (p. 400 n. 37). The consequences of this are evident in her comment, 'Thomas refuses to believe (*pisteuein*) in Jesus' resurrection until he has seen the marks of the nails ...' (p. 424: John 20.24-25), which ignores the absence of an object to the verb 'believe' throughout this section, including in Jesus' macarism in 20.29.<sup>17</sup>

John is not a message that happens to have taken a specific literary form but that could be abstracted from that form without any substantive change. At the same time John tells a story, or promulgates a 'myth'<sup>18</sup>— the myth of the son sent by the father into the (hostile) world, and his eventual return, together with all that accompanies or is entailed by that. It is not possible to separate between the myth and the person within the 'human' narrative who is the subject of that myth; hence, as a response to Jesus, both within the narrative and for readers who are outside it but addressed by it, 'believing' implies 'buying into' or appropriating the myth. It follows that for the Gospel 'to believe' is to acknowledge that 'to see' is both impossible and now also undesirable, but at the same time it is to accept the world created by that myth, as a world of seeing and hearing, as an accurate account of how things are. How this relates to the language and convictions of 'Johannine believers' remains enigmatic, and hardly helped by the different pattern in the letters.

It is inevitable that with a book as detailed and richly textured as this, every challenge will have to be qualified by admission of an insight that is offered somewhere else within it. What has been explored above is more an engagement in conversation and reflection than a set of critiques. Much more could be said in appreciation, and other chapters chosen for the conversation. I have learned a lot from the opportunity to spend time with Teresa Morgan and am grateful for it. There can be no doubt that *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* will continue to be a resource and inspiration for many other conversations.

## References

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<sup>17</sup> So also John 20.8. The 'absolute' use comes 29 times in John.

<sup>18</sup> 'Myth' here denotes a narrative in which the participants are not exclusively human, and which functions in a foundational way for a people or system.

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