

Prior as Naphtali: Christian commentator and pseudonymous Christian public intellectual

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Abstract

During 1951-1952 Arthur Prior wrote a column of firstly public comment, and then, in 1952, theological discussion under the nom-de plume Naphtali of the Outlook, the magazine of the New Zealand Presbyterian Church. This article discusses these columns, putting them in a wider discussion of Prior's life, thought and Christian beliefs; and his early work in New Zealand as a public thinker.

Keywords: A.N.Prior; theology; public-intellectual; Presbyterianism; Catholicism; Politics; Philosophy; Belief; New Zealand.

1 Introduction

Arthur Prior (1914-1969) is now most associated with tense logic, yet before his discovery of Polish notation in 1952 he was also very active as a public intellectual in New Zealand and this included writing on religion (see: Grimshaw 2020, 2023, 2024a). In the 1930s Prior moved from being

a Methodist to a Barthian Presbyterian (Grimshaw 2018, 2021) and was accepted for training for the Presbyterian ministry. However, meeting and quickly marrying the left-wing journalist Clare Prior (nee Hunter) in 1936 forced his withdrawal from ministry training and his formal theological studies and resulted in his return to philosophy. Despite this change, Prior remained very active in the Presbyterian church and wider Barthian circles, both in New Zealand and from 1938-1940 in Britain and Europe (Grimshaw 2018). The marriage was starting to unravel during the start of the war and upon return to New Zealand in 1940 Clare Prior left him for his younger adopted cousin Norman Brailsford (Grimshaw 2018). In 1943 Prior married Mary Wilkinson who came from a well-known Presbyterian clergy family (see Grimshaw 2024a) and he re-entered the world of New Zealand Presbyterian life and culture. After war-service in the Airforce in the Pacific, Prior began his professional career as a philosopher at Canterbury University College, while also seeking to become known as a public intellectual (Grimshaw 2023, 2024a).

A question that has been raised by many Prior scholars is how long did Arthur Prior continue to identify as a 'Christian' as he moved into being employed as a philosopher and more so, as a logician? In 1967 he stated: "I used to be a Barthian Calvinist, and have an expert knowledge of seventeenth-century Scottish theology, which I now never use, and have no religious beliefs." (Kenny p.2) It is well known that he suffered a time of atheism in 1942 (Jakobsen 2016; Grimshaw 2023b), but emerging from this in July 1943 (Jakobsen 2020) he rejoined Christian circles and for some years was a Kirk Elder in the Presbyterian church of New Zealand in the 1950s; but it should be noted, Prior did not join the Presbyterian church in Manchester having relocated there in 1959.

While in the 1930s he continued various forms of first Methodist and then Presbyterian lay-preaching¹ (both in New Zealand and then later, in England), it seems he abandoned this form of Christian activity upon his return to New Zealand in 1940. What is clear from his earliest writings on

¹ Prior was both a Methodist and Presbyterian lay preacher in Masterton 1932-1936, as can be seen via a search of the Wairarapa Daily Times on the papers past website. This seems to have only stopped once he married Clare Prior (nee Hunter); yet also he also resumed this activity when in England. (Grimshaw, 2021 p.40). Prior's thinking as a young Methodist is collected and discussed in Jakobsen, D., Øhrstrøm, P., Prior, M., & Rini, A. (ed.) (2020). *Three Little Essays: Arthur Prior in 1931*. (1 ed.) Aalborg University Pubstation. *Logic and Philosophy of Time Volume 3*: https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/384984801/PRIOR3_OA.pdf

religion in 1931 is that Prior's Christianity was as much an intellectual identity as it was a spiritual/believer's one (see Grimshaw 2023c). That is, the intellectual questions of Christian theology and Church history provided a frame to think within and against that was, it is suggested, as – if not more – important over this post-war period than 'pew participation' was.

One previously little-known expression of this intellectual Christianity of Prior's was a form of public-intellectual Christianity undertaken in the New Zealand Presbyterian magazine *The Outlook*. Between February 1950 and October 1951 Prior wrote a column² under the pseudonym Naphtali, one of the 12 tribes (and one of the ten lost tribes) of Israel. Given Prior's sense of humour it can be conjectured that Naphtali was chosen because apocryphally, the Naphtali tribe ended up in the South Pacific as the ancestors of today's Pacific peoples. As to the column itself, it has been described as "a column of answers to questions on theological or ecclesiastical matters which were purported to have been sent in by readers." (McEldowney, p.38)³ These Naphtali columns

² I thank Jane Bloore, Archives Volunteer PCNZ Archives, Dunedin for compiling a list and files of these columns for me (July 2020) and the Archivist, Rachel Hurd for making available the relevant pages from the Public Questions Committee Minute Book and The Proceedings of the General Assembly for 1949, 1950 & 1951.

³ McEldowney, who met Anderson towards the end of November 1951 (McEldowney 1966, p.36) wrote of how Anderson took over Prior's column: "Among the work Donald was doing for Alun Richards was a column of answers to questions on theological or ecclesiastical matters which were purported to have been sent in by readers. This series had been begun by Arthur Prior, probably the most distinguished philosopher working in New Zealand at that time, under the name 'Naphtali'. In calling himself 'Gad' Donald was following Professor Prior's example in taking his pseudonym from the Tribes of Israel." (McEldowney 1966, p.38). McEldowney was working with Richards at this time (McEldowney 1966, p.38) and therefore if someone else had been writing the Naphtali column in between Prior doing so and Anderson taking it on under a new pseudonym this would have been reported.

I thank Anne-Maree Mills for alerting me to this reference, which has resulted in this article.

Donald Anderson (1923-1961) disabled from birth by Cerebral Palsy, took First Class Honours in English and French at Otago university and then a B.Litt from Oxford. He was a critic for Charles Brasch's *Landfall*, and wrote for the *Listener*, *The Outlook* and various newspapers. In November 1951, when he took over the column, Anderson was living with Alun Richards and his family and helping out with *The Outlook* (McEldowney 1966, p.36). A member of the Student Christian Movement, Anderson was friends with Jonathan Bennett, and McEldowney records his enjoyment of hearing Anderson and Bennett "in quick time disposing of the problems of the University of New Zealand, the Presbyterian Church and the Student Christian Movement." (McEldowney 1966, p.40). Bennett was also at

and associated letters provide a fresh insight into Prior's religious and Christian thought at this time. We have no record as to why Prior took up this challenge, nor how he saw his task. It could be that Prior was building up 'a type' as Naphtali⁴ and this enabled a distinct Presbyterian and Christian entity⁵ and identity to exist separate from Prior the philosopher. We also need to remember that Prior was, from the 1930s, a well-known figure in many Presbyterian circles due to his work in the SCM, his friendship with many Presbyterian clergy and his membership of various Presbyterian Committees in this post-war period. Yet the Presbyterian Church, like all churches, was and is composed of many internal sub-groups, primarily theological but also doctrinal. The use of the nom-de-plume therefore meant Prior could write as 'not Prior'; but perhaps, most crucially, be read as 'not Prior', as would be made clear on the introduction of the 'Naphtali' column.

The editor of *The Outlook*, Alun Richards⁶ had known Prior since the 1930s when they both wrote for the SCM journals *Open Windows* and

Oxford with Anderson. Bennett was himself acting editor of *The Outlook* in 1953 while Richards was away, and in fact published a booklet of poems he included in *The Outlook* during his editorship. However, when the editorship fell open, while interested Bennett remembers "ANP strenuously urged me not to accept. End of Story." (email to Grimshaw, 4 July 2020). Instead, Bennett persuaded Anderson to apply and while successful he withdrew because he had decided to become an Anglican. (McEldowney 1966, p.78) Bennett's booklet, *Poems From The Outlook* (January-June 1953) was an off-print from *The Outlook* with a very small run of 150 copies and distributed privately by Bennett. There were twenty poems included, five of which were published for the first time in *The Outlook*. The poets were in the main a roll call of the leading New Zealand poets at that time: James K. Baxter, Allen Curnow, Basil Dowling, Eileen Duggan, J.R. Hervey, Robin Hyde, Louis Johnson, M.K. Joseph, R.A.K. Mason, Colin Newbury and Kendrick Smithyman.

⁴ I thank the anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article for raising this question.

⁵ While Prior was at this time a Christian, it is important to emphasize that he was a Calvinist – and in New Zealand, a Presbyterian – Christian. This was as much a theological distinction and differentiation as it was a denominational one. This is why he would later describe himself as having been "a Barthian Calvinist"; because for Prior such specific distinctions are crucial to both his intellectual and theological identity. (Kenny, p.2).

⁶ Alun Richards (1907-2000), was a noted pacifist in the 1920s while at student at Auckland University (he was punished by parliament who removed his civil rights for 10 years). He trained at the Presbyterian Theological Hall, Dunedin 1931 and then studied on a church scholarship at New College, Edinburgh 1932-33. Upon return to New Zealand, he was a parish minister in a remote West Coast parish 1934-1938. Richards then moved into various forms of church and lay journalism. He was editor of *The Outlook* 1948-1955. It is recorded that he "transformed the 'Outlook' into a lively and interesting magazine dealing with social as well as

The Student.⁷ Prior had also undertaken various forms of ‘public intellectual’ journalism in the postwar years under his own name while lecturing in philosophy at Canterbury University College.⁸ ‘Naphtali’ however was a different type of venture and the origins and reason for the pseudonym were provided in an inset box in this first column:

Outlook Commentators for 1950 are being drawn upon from a panel of men and women, each an expert in their own field, who, asked by the Assembly’s Public Questions Committee⁹ to give this service when called upon, have generously consented. In many cases they will find it necessary to write under pseudonyms, but their competence and their good faith are assured. “Naphtali” will deal with overseas events, writing normally once a fortnight.

(Richards 1950, p.8)

The Public Questions Committee (PQC) had already raised concern regarding the Outlook in their report to the General Assembly in 1949, expressing the desire to see the circulation increased because, ‘Far too few Presbyterian families see “The Outlook” regularly. To be thoroughly effective, all Church members need its weekly information and stimulus.’ (PQC 1950, p.8) The report of the following year noted that the editor believed “if a church paper is not reaching people on the fringe of its

religious topics”. Denis McEldowney recalls Richards as a “persistent person” who “had determined that I would write for him on religious broadcasting” which he did so in a 900 word monthly column: “I gave my opinions about ministers on the air with what seems to me now to have been astonishing rudeness, and, as far as I can gather, delighted the ministry by doing so.” (McEldowney, 1957/1976, p.12) See Richards’ entry in the Register of New Zealand Presbyterian Ministers, Deaconesses & Missionaries 1840 to 2015 <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/Page194.htm>

⁷ It also seems highly likely that it was Prior, as student of J.N. Findlay and past co-editor (in 1934 of *Open Windows*, the predecessor of the *Student*) and ongoing contributor, who was responsible for Findlay providing a “critical commentary” (pp.6-7) to Richards’ article “Thinking about Thinking”, in *Open Windows*, August 1935, pp.4-6.

⁸ See Grimshaw (2020), “The Public Prior: A.N. Prior as (relocated 17th & 18th century) Public Intellectual 1945-1952.”

⁹ The Public Questions Committee was an influential group who had a very wide remit and made comment, both within the church and into public forums, including to parliament, on a number of issues. At this time, it was chaired by Rev. J.S. Sommerville who had been a fellow student with Prior at Knox College in the 1930s and who Prior had drawn upon in 1936 to write for the Calvin Centenary issue of the Bible Class magazine *Four Square* he was editing. Prior wrote very warmly of Sommerville and his theological and literary ability to Ursula Bethell. See, Grimshaw (2018), p.44 and p.47 n.22.

readership as well as its core, she is not giving the Church the service she should expect from it." To do this, the form and content had to be made "more popular." (PQC 1950, p.210)¹⁰ Therefore, "an endeavor has been made to encourage discussion of issues affecting the moral life of the community by inviting an expression of all shades of opinion." (PQC 1950 p.284)¹¹

2 The Naphtali columns: an overview

As will be discussed in detail below, Prior wrote 28 columns as Naphtali over the period February -April 1950 and March-October 1951.

The first five columns appeared in 1950 and were a direct response to the request of the Public Questions Committee. It would appear however that demand of the readership of the Outlook was not for 'Public Questions' comment and insight but rather for questions of church history, theology and church practice. We can see this shift with the reactivation of the Naphtali column in 1951 and the list of topics discussed.

One possible reading of these 1951 columns is that they can be understood as a type of Christian apologetics. Yet these are never 'just' apologetics; rather they are, I suggest a continuation and refocusing of the digressive philosophizing and theologizing Prior undertook in the 1940s (see Jakobsen 2012 and Jakobsen 2020).

We also know from McEldowney (1966) these Outlook letters Naphtali 'responded to' were in fact written by Prior as part of his column. They are therefore I'd suggest a theological and intellectual exercise undertaken by Prior, not in themselves traditional apologetics. But we must also not forget that they also occur in the year when Prior

¹⁰ It was noted that circulation was now over 10,000 copies a week, but it required 12,000 if it was to continue (p.211). Prior's Naphtali column was one of those by "contributors able and free to conduct 'departments'. Minutes of the Public Questions Committee, Friday 10 February 1950, Public Questions Committee Of The General Assembly, Minute Book 5.3. 1948 to 6.6.58 pp.210-211.

¹¹ In this report the editorial stance of Richards was made clear, and this can be seen to reflect what Prior was also endeavouring to do in his Naphtali column: "I am convinced that, while a Church paper should provide devotional reading and reflect current activities in news, it has also the more dynamic and much more difficult duty of helping the rank and files of members to participate in thought in the ongoing part of the Christian movement in the world: in short, that the paper should be a forum of discussion as well as record of things already said and done. Finally, it is not in the Church so much as in the world that a Church paper should aim at interesting its readers. It has the means to do this as Church services do not." (PQC 1950 p.285)

has become a Kirk Elder [Copeland 2022] and being able to answer and engage with such questions was part of the wider pastoral responsibilities and expectations of Kirk Elder. We can therefore suggest that the 1951 columns are an insight into Prior as Kirk Elder; but here not just Kirk Elder for his local parish, but rather for the *Outlook*.

But it is also worth noting that while the Naphtali columns ended in 1951, Prior's substantial public intellectual role also primarily ended the following year in 1952. (Grimshaw 2020) As professor of philosophy Prior had new demands upon his time; but most importantly, he also now had a new interest and focus in symbolic logic that was demanding a great deal of his time and effort. (Grimshaw 2024) As Kenney notes, the speed at which Prior, in his late thirties, was able to master advanced discoveries in symbolic logic surprised his correspondents. (Kenney 1970 p.333) Prior's newfound focus and output and impact were noted by others. In his 1954 Margaret Condliffe Memorial Lecture, 'The New Zealand Scholar', the historian J.G. Beaglehole noted the significant turn to research meant the university that had existed previous to the last decade 'is dead'.(Beaglehole 1954, p.30)¹² Beaglehole most tellingly singled out the example of philosophy publishing, and especially the research of Arthur Prior: 'it is a phenomenon completely unprecedented in New Zealand. Professor Prior is really a new sort of New Zealander. He is making a new sort of university.' (Beaglehole 1954, p.30)¹³ As such, the end of the Naphtali columns are indicative of this new turn and focus in Prior's professional, philosophical life.

1950

"Current Comment", Naphtali, February 22.

"Current Comment", Naphtali, March 8.

"South Africa mainly", Naphtali, March 22.

"Who made the welfare state?", Naphtali, April 5.

"How to meet and treat communists", Naphtali, April 26.

1951

"Why Baptize Babies?", Naphtali, March 13.

¹² Beaglehole, *The New Zealand Scholar*, p.30.

¹³ For discussion of the role of Prior and others in the creation of the research culture in New Zealand, and at Canterbury University College, see Mike Grimshaw, "A thwarted Mind?" Popper, Prior, and Pocock and the turn to research in sciences and humanities at Canterbury University College 1945-1946, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 56, 2 (2022) 3-27.

"Authority?", Naphtali, March 20.
 "Protestant?", Naphtali, The Outlook, March 27.
 "Wine into Water?", Naphtali, The Outlook, April 3.
 "Why Presbyterian?", Naphtali, The Outlook, April 10.
 "Letters to Naphtali", Naphtali, The Outlook, April 17, 'Fruit of the Vine'.
 "Silence on heaven", Naphtali, The Outlook, April 24.
 "As Thyself", Naphtali, The Outlook, May 1.
 "What Difference?", Naphtali, The Outlook, May 8.
 "Wherein Do They Offend?", Naphtali, The Outlook, June 19.
 "Sack Pacifists?", Naphtali, The Outlook, May 15.
 "Response to letter "Sack Pacifists?", Naphtali, The Outlook, June 19.
 "Word of God?", Naphtali, The Outlook, June 5.
 "Jesus a Socialist?", Naphtali, The Outlook June 12.
 "Matter disproved?", Naphtali, The Outlook, June 26.
 "Why Doctrine?", Naphtali, The Outlook, July 3.
 "Why Christ?", Naphtali, The Outlook, July 10.
 "Pie in the Sky?" Naphtali, The Outlook, July 31.
 "Women Elders?", Naphtali, The Outlook, August 7.
 "Naphtali Replies", Naphtali, The Outlook, August 14.
 "Are Elders Ministers?", Naphtali, The Outlook, August 28.
 "Result or Motive?", Naphtali, The Outlook, October 16.
 "Which Church?", Naphtali, The Outlook, October 23, p.6.

The Naphtali columns 1950

The Naphtali column began on February 22, 1950, under the heading 'Current Content'. Prefaced with an abridged quote from Henry V¹⁴, Prior discusses the "appalling responsibility that goes with government, even in a democratic state" in reference to President Truman's decision to develop the hydrogen bomb. Prior situates this is a discussion of democracy whereby while in theory such decisions are not those of an individual, in reality the leader is not "merely the instrument of the

¹⁴ "Upon the king – let us our lives, our
souls,

Our children and our sins lay on
king!

We must bear all! What infinite
heart's ease

Must kings neglect that private men enjoy." This is an abbreviation of *Henry V*, act 4 scene 1.

people's will." (Prior 1950a) But Prior also locates the decision in the context of the cold war arms race whereby "no government can wander far from public opinion" (Prior 1950a), yet at the same time he is careful to position such an act of 'security' in opposition to 'peace' and state "that is the principal objection to it." (Prior 1950a) To make his point he quotes from an unnamed (and unsourced) "young French theological student" who visited America and wrote of his perception that America was already at war, supported by their "unthinking confidence" and their assertion "that God was on their side." (Prior 1950a) The complacency that results means, the student states, such Americans "'have no need of God or His Salvation'". (Prior 1950a) Prior's concluding point is that if one's security means the insecurity of another then peace dependent on such security "is as far away as ever." (Prior 1950a) Therefore, the "truth" is that "Truman's decision is unsatisfactory" (Prior 1950a), even if no other choice was possible.

In this first column we can see why the pseudonym was offered; Prior is critiquing the basis of cold war security and American attitudes as anti-Christian while acknowledging the compromises of "worldly" decisions within a democracy. He positions Christian peace versus worldly security as a theological commentator and this too requires the use of a pseudonym because of his employment as a philosophy lecturer at Canterbury University College. It is not that Prior could not speak out as a public intellectual under his own name, he had done so and would continue to do so, but did so primarily as a philosophical public intellectual. Here he reverts more to his role as religious/theological public intellectual as he had undertaken in the 1930s when, because of both the context and issues discussed, he decided as a theological student and as a known figure in religious circles to use a variety of pseudonyms, most commonly 'Richard Bramley' [see Grimshaw 2023]. The pseudonym therefore provides a double advantage: Prior can write freely as a theological thinker, not as a philosopher, on current issues.

The next Naphtali column is divided into two comments. The first is a critique of those who seek to align American society and democracy with 'the good', especially in the context of the cold war, in this dismissing those businessmen seeking "moral regeneration in the business world" and finding it in the American way of life. Prior describes this as yet a further example of America's moral complacency wherein the increased production of goods at less cost is being confused with the question of 'the good of all'. In this critique, the philosopher is perhaps speaking more than the theologian. The second comment is a response to the

British elections and the return of the Labour government with a majority radically shrunk to 5 from previously, 146. Prior is focused on the question of division and what that means for planned projects in an increasingly divided society and a government with impaired authority, “uncertain of itself and its support.” This continues Prior’s concern that an impaired democracy, either by moral complacency as in the United States or limited by deep division is, in both cases unable for many “to provide an antidote to Communism.” (Prior 1950b) This is as much a political statement by Prior as a theological one and a position reiterated in later columns. In his Naphtali writings it becomes clear that Prior was a common type in the post-war period, an anti-communist socialist, a Christian Social Democrat – albeit within a New Zealand political and social context.

The issue of South Africa issuing racial identity cards led Naphtali’s third column and here he turned to discuss a deep theological issue. Prior observes that the approval of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa for apartheid has a theological basis in seeing themselves (‘the white population’) as ‘the chosen people’ who must, in God’s plan, remain apart from others and not be swamped by them. Prior identifies that in a theological sense there could be argued to be “some force and truth in this view”, but only if “the actual attitude” of the white population “was one of Pure exclusiveness and non-interference.” However, it is not, instead being “a one-way exclusiveness in practice if not in theory.” (Prior 1950c) The issue is that the white population’s one-sided interference with the non-white population means that “the theological theory does not square with the political facts.” This is not only Prior operating as a theological thinker, it is Prior applying logic to both politics and theology. (Prior 1950c) Prior also mentions the steel industry of the Saar region, divided between France and Germany, criticizing French moves for control, while concluding with a comment on the plight of “some five hundred alien scientists in the United States” who wish to return home but are unable to because of American security concerns. Prior’s position is again that political security is not the same as divine truth, nor is knowledge best used to pursue and increase one’s own power.

Naphtali then turned to the question “Who made the welfare state?” (Prior 1950d), basing this on a BBC talk for American listeners concerning changes over the past decade. Prior notes that employment changes and the shift to a primarily wage-earning population, accompanied by increased wages and the impact of taxation changes has resulted in a new

type of society with a far narrower range of incomes than previously; a narrower range than also in America, France, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia, Switzerland or Italy. Prior's central point is such changes "add up to a very considerable revolution" which confuse traditional party politics as "the social groupings to which their traditional programmes were addressed no longer exist." (Prior 1950d) What interests Prior is how the justified "religious insight" that "each and every person is of infinite value" is often claimed to be supported by the unjustified proposition" that "all men are and should be equal." (Prior 1950d) This is a central theological and philosophical point for Prior, for while "infinite value" means no-one should want for the necessities of life and it is a waste if people are not given the opportunity to develop their talent, this does not mean talents should not be cultivated and rewarded in different ways. Prior provides the example of a "brain worker" who might require "more cultivated surroundings to perform his particular service", arguing that to pay the brain worker enough to afford these "is not religiously wrong nor socially inexpedient".(Prior 1950d)¹⁵ Prior's youthful bohemian flirtation with communism had obviously ended¹⁶, not only with the end of his marriage to the fellow

¹⁵ This can also be contextualized by contemporary discussions in New Zealand as to the proper reward and support for the University of New Zealand, including research support. This was perhaps put most forcefully by the Victoria University College librarian, Harold Miller in a survey on whether New Zealand had 'a third rate university': '...if New Zealand wants a first class University it must be prepared to pay for it and to give up paying lecturers less than carpenters and plumbers.' 'Third rate University?' *New Zealand Listener*, March 22, 1946, p.7. [For further discussion on this, see Mike Grimshaw, "A thwarted Mind?" Popper, Prior, and Pocock and the turn to research in sciences and humanities at Canterbury University College 1945-1946, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 56, 2 (2022) 3-27.

¹⁶ Prior's politics at this time were that of a Social Democrat. His son Martin knows Arthur and Mary voted Labour in the 1954 New Zealand general election and he states: "By the late 50s Arthur was totally a social democrat" (personal email, 11 October 2019). Yet while also for many years from the 1930s-1940s a Christian Socialist he seems to have also have continued an openness to Marxist economics that was finally extinguished in 1946 by reading his old mentor Lex Miler's *The Christian Significance of Marxism*"; Prior writing to Miller:" That job of informing people about what Communism is, couldn't have been done better. But it had an effect on me which almost certainly was not intended. It has released me from a sort of complex that I have had about Marxism right up til now, a kind of inward bondage to it despite all my points of difference from it, based on the feeling that though its philosophy might be abominable its economics were unanswerable." Also noting "I write, of course, with the zeal of a convert; or more accurately with the indignation of a man who has just discovered that he has been hoodwinked for years."

traveler Clare Prior (nee Hunter) in 1942, but also that he now had full time employment as a university lecturer, was remarried in 1943 (to Mary Prior) and had a son (Martin) and very soon in 1950, a daughter(Anne); and the house they had been living in had burned down the previous year¹⁷. It is this change in domestic context that, as much as anything can be seen to explain the force of this central statement by Prior that can be read as much personal and societal:

“In a society of increasing equality we need to watch that the talents that only flower in a measure of luxury are not stifled – the artists¹⁸ and thinkers, whose contribution to social well-being is no less real for being invisible. These are gifts that mature only after long training and hard work, and although they are very much their own reward, yet physical leisure and domestic ease are indispensable for their proper exercise. Such things are, for such people, less an incentive (although they are much talked of as such) than conditions for efficiency. If it does not provide them society will not be as well served by its thinkers and artists as it might be.”
(Prior 1950d)

This is perhaps one of the more personal statements Prior publicly made, for this was not just a statement regarding broad theological, or religious or philosophical concepts, this was a focused argument for a meritocratic society if its rewards were extended from the usual business realm to the intellectual and artistic ones. What is interesting is how Prior proceeds from a discussion of the British welfare state and its new social groupings to argue for, in the New Zealand context especially, the necessity to oppose any radically equalizing socialist or communist ethos in the name of social well-being. It can also be read as Prior’s reworking of the parable of the talents [Matthew 25: 14-30; Luke 19: 11-27] combined

Arthur Prior to Lex Miller, (letter-10pp incomplete, handwritten) 26/3, 1946 [Stanford University Archives: Miller papers (sc495 box 1 folder 1)],

¹⁷ Lost in the fire was the ms of a book on Scottish theology; notes for this can be seen in a fire damaged book (accessed via the virtual lab for Prior studies: <https://priorstudies.org/>), much of which is extracts (and some commentary) from Adam Gibbs’ ‘Sacred Contemplations’. Prior turned from this project to a refocus on logic.

¹⁸ We can also assume that Prior is thinking of those artists he got to know and influence in Dunedin and beyond, especially the noted New Zealand painters Toss Woollaston and Colin McCahon, both of whom were living in very straightened circumstances at this time.

with the theological justification of “protest against real poverty”. It is, we could say, also an argument against what was widely noted as the anti-intellectualism and philistinism of New Zealand society.

Also in this column, Prior makes a second, brief statement, critiquing a newspaper headline that claimed American bombers arriving in Great Britain as part of the Atlantic Pact, were “Harbingers of Peace”. Prior calls this “pious eye-wash” with the report being even more alarming than the sending of the bombers, concluding: “Sheer stupidity can be almost as dangerous as active ill-will in today’s world.” (Prior 1950d) This continues his focus on the confusion of cold war politics as acts of peace from within a Christian viewpoint.

The issue of communism becomes the sole focus of Prior’s next column, ‘How to treat and meet communists’ (Prior 1950e). While on the face of it this discussion arose in response to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s “Red-baiting in high places”, there was also, at this time a discussion on academic freedom in the University of New Zealand¹⁹, occasioned by the statement of the Vice Chancellor, to the University Senate in January 1950: “...who can deny today that there are people belonging to the Communist party who would adopt tactics to support their doctrine in the universities? I would not appoint such a man to the staff of a university college in New Zealand, no matter how brilliant he was.”²⁰ Vice Chancellor Smith was discussing Walter Moberly’s *The Crisis in the University* (1949), in which Moberly defended the appointment of ‘heretics’, as long as so many are not appointed as to endanger common basic values. We can be quite confident that this book and Smith’s statement sat behind Prior’s discussion because not only was Prior a university lecturer he was also at this time, like Moberly a Christian university lecturer concerned with what university education can offer in a post-Christian world; and there was also a copy held in the Canterbury

19 For a discussion of what this debate could mean for contemporary New Zealand, see Mike Grimshaw “Heretics – but no Communists – in the University??!!” Plain Sight 2024: <https://plainsight.nz/heretics-but-no-communists-in-the-university/>

20 Smith’s comments were widely reported in the New Zealand newspapers on January 27, 1950, and resulted in a widespread discussion on academic freedom. Smith was discussing Walter Moberly’s *The Crisis in the University* (1949), in which Moberly defended the appointment of ‘heretics’, as long as so many are not appointed as to endanger common basic values. There were two articles discussing this question of freedom in the university to come in the New Zealand journal *Landfall* (June 1950), a journal Prior read and contributed to. See Grimshaw (2024a) for how Prior discussed this with Charles Brasch, the editor of *Landfall*.

University College library – and Prior was part of a reading and discussion group responding to it at Canterbury University College²¹.

Prior critiques and dismisses the American red-baiting as resulting in “a persuasive feeling of insecurity and eventually to mass hysteria and a real witch hunt” (Prior 1950e) – that is, he dismisses their illogicality and lack of a rational, thoughtful response. In opposition, Prior records that “in the matter of handling communism and communists” (Prior 1950e) we can learn from the Moral Re-Armament movement whose “valuable lessons” are aligned with those put forward from within the Presbyterian Church (Dr George MacLeod), the Anglican Church, (Father Herbert) and the Roman Catholic Church (by the Jocist²² movement). Prior is thus arguing for an ecumenical Christian response which on the personal level – that is “in direct person contact” – is able to express: “a) the inadequacy of Communism and, b) the superiority of our faith.” (Prior 1950e) To fail to do so and just regard “Communists as outlaws” is to risk repelling and offending “the non-Communist working-man who knows the Communist as a workmate not very different from himself” as well as risking any “missionary contact” which is the Church’s main responsibility, as well as undertaking “the ultimate blasphemy” which is “to deny the love of God for whom no man is an outlaw.” (Prior 1950e) Prior is clear to state that there is “evil in the heart of the Communist”, an evil that poisons society – because it is a poison that all humanity share – and which he emphasizes, only Christ can answer. But he also acknowledges this is “a task that comfortable middle-class Christians cannot begin to perform”, rather it is a task for Christian trade unionist and especially wharf labourers “since the ports of the world are the battleground at present”²³ to demonstrate “that, along with an equally devoted concern for the well-being of mankind, Christians have a better way of getting it.” (Prior 1950e)²⁴

21 Instituted in 1950 by the Classical scholar Henry Broadhead, it ran until c. 1955.

See *A History of the University of Canterbury 1873-1972* p.389.

22 The Young Catholic Workers movement

23 These were prophetic words in the new context, with New Zealand, in 1951 entering a very long-running and bitter waterfront dispute (15 February 1951- 15 July 1951), still the largest and most widespread industrial dispute in New Zealand’s history.

24 Prior’s attitude towards communism has hardened considerably since his more radical Christian Socialist youth in the 1930s where, for example, in the long letter to *Open Windows* “Christianity and Communism” (Prior 1932) he is far more supportive of the aims and achievements of communism, especially in the field of

The 'current comment' focus of Naphtali finished after this offering and there was almost a year-long break before Naphtali returned, this time in a column of answers to questions purported to have been sent in by readers.

The Naphtali columns 1951

In 1951 Prior took the step of becoming an Elder in the St Martin's Presbyterian church in Christchurch (Copeland 2022). This meant Naphtali is, for those 'in the know' now also a church elder as well as a philosopher and this I suggest can be discerned in the change of focus and discussion in his columns for 1951. These are explicitly "Presbyterian" questions and answers, in many ways they can also be read and understood as a type of pastoral theology resource dealing with the type of questions elders may be asked to engage with as part of their duties.

The first column was in response to a question asking for scriptural justification for infant baptism. (Prior 1951a) Prior begins by stating "the whole bible is my proof-text" situating it as the story of the family of God, even if "its 'holy' members were rather a rough crew; but this family were God's people, in fact His Church." (Prior 1951a) Prior provides a very general precis of the history of the Jews and Israel and then the return of all humanity as the family of God through Christ whereby Baptism is the entry into this new, but restored relationship – or family. For Prior, baptism is not a sign of having "got religion", rather it is reminder of humanity's relationship to God being that of child within the family of God, a relationship that reminds us that everyone is part of the family of God as we were once in the past "before we were cursed with the 'organized religions' of heathenism and Christendom." (Prior 1951a) Prior's central point is that baptism is for everyone within the family of God for all are in the family of God; therefore, infant baptism is the reminder that the baptized has a claim of the Church and the Church has a claim of them.²⁵

social progress, noting the difference between the "two religions" is in "more a quantitative than a qualitative one", that being the type and focus of the "great 'beyond'" striven for; communism believing it is attainable by human action, the Christian that is only "attainable by the grace of God." (p.20).

²⁵ Two letters in repose to this column were printed on April 3, 1951, p3. The first, from 'A.M.B' said there was no scriptural justification-, rather it "is just a tradition" and that Naphtali should have said so, but instead "he bluffed." The other letter,

Naphtali's next "question" to deal with concerns the authority of the Roman Catholic church as "the first church" (Prior1951b)²⁶, and begins by reminding readers that the first church was in Jerusalem and that is where Presbyterians are "taught to look to". He then makes a further, very clear, protestant, Presbyterian statement:

"It is the God of Abraham and David we seek to serve, not the God of Rome's Pontifex maximus, the heathen dignitary whose title the popes have taken to themselves."

(Prior1951b)

Naphtali asks who breaks away from whom? Was the break always from the Roman church or was the Roman church breaking away from those who reject Roman papal authority – whether the Eastern church or the protestant reformers? He develops this point in discussing the long history of dissent and authority, wherein sometimes true authority resides in dissent against the church. He then concludes with a statement of divine preference for thinking Christians: "Finally, the church's 'authority' is something a man can worry about more than he should. God does not want dumb clods and yes-men for His people." (Prior1951b) We can again see the advantage of the pseudonym, it allows Prior to make strong direct statements that, if made under his own name, could cause problems for him – whether as philosopher or, as someone who is an elder in the Presbyterian church. But there is also more than a hint of the Presbyterian sermon here, this is not just information being provided but also an exhortation to think theologically in the world as much as in faith.

The question of Protestant identity is further developed in the next column. Prior begins by stating he is more often to use "Presbyterian" than Protestant as a self-description, just as others he knows use similar denominational identifiers as Methodist or Anglican. Such denominational differentiation is as much as signaling difference to the other Protestant denominations as to the Roman church and in answering this he begins to draw upon the logic of language use to ask:

from 'W.S.M' explained in more detail there is no scriptural justification and that Presbyterians were "scripturally wrong" therefore to say "that infants are members of Christ's Church".

²⁶ B.W. asks: "What is the answer to 'But of course the Roman Catholic Church speaks with authority. It was the first church and all you others broke away from it.'"

“...if we single out any one denomination, and then try to define a single word that will cover all denominations but that one, how can that word be anything but a negative one, like ‘non-Anglican’, or ‘non-Christadelphian’ – or ‘non-Roman’ or ‘Protestant’?”

(Prior 1951c)

Asking what the alternative is, he suggests use could be made of “Catholic” or “Christian” but “Christian” is taken by a small sect in England²⁷. Therefore, he comes down on the side of Catholic as a name belonging to all Christians, arguing “we cannot exclude by an essentially inclusive word”, again applying logic to theological, or rather, religious questions. This means the various forms of Christian identity have the ability to encompass positive words which do not exclude (“Catholic”), positive words (“Presbyterian”) which do not include all Protestants, “and for the rest, I think a negative word should content us.” (Prior 1951c) Prior expands into a discussion of the negative sides of affirmation and the need to deny as well as affirm, which includes being prepared to not only self-name as Protestants but also act as them “and make no bones about it” (Prior 1951c). Here again we see the deploying of the particular style of reasoning Prior is developing, a combination of theology and philosophy, applying logic to questions of religion and theology.

The next column dealt with the question of what Presbyterians use in place of communion wine and why? Prior, as a onetime Methodist lay preacher in a dry town (Masterton) (Grimshaw 2021) notes that other denominations also use a similar non-alcoholic liquid and that it occurs because of “the intemperate advocacy of ‘temperance’.” (Prior 1951d, p.6) Prior deplores such intemperance as well as noting the “dishonesty” in which ministers may “refer to ‘this wine’ when they mean ‘this raspberry cordial’”.²⁸ Prior’s focus becomes one of what could be termed theological and symbolic logic: does it actually matter whether what is in the cup is fermented, to the extent of asking if communion could not be

²⁷ It is interesting to note how, over the following 70 years ‘Christian’ became increasingly the nomenclature of the evangelical protestant of the born-again and Pentecostal varieties – even for those within the more mainstream protestant churches. On the other hand, the protestant use of ‘catholic,’ has tended to almost completely disappear from use.

²⁸ In coming decades, the move in NZ protestant churches was often to blackcurrant juice, usually accompanied by every small squares of cut-up commercial, sliced white bread (without crusts).

taken with tea?²⁹ His point is that the significance is not tied up with reproducing “all the Palestinian trapping of the original Supper” (Prior 1951d, p.7); yet he concludes in wishing that not only proper wine but also a proper wafer “of unleavened bread”³⁰ is used “to remind us that this is ‘the Christian Passover’ because there is so much of real spiritual value in the ‘Passover’ idea.” (Prior 1951d, p.7)

A follow-up to the “Protestant” column is Naphtali’s next focus when he answers why Presbyterians are so named. In this he is clear to state it is because of the governance by presbyteries not by presbyters; in this “Not the individual presbyters, but the presbytery, is the ‘bishop’ in our system”. (Prior 1951e p.6) Prior notes that Presbyterian is the name used in English-speaking countries whereas elsewhere the name is “reformed”, but also noting the Church of Scotland does not officially use the name “presbyterian’. It is therefore, he emphasizes, a name of governmental differentiation – from episcopal government as well as from congregational government – wherein the presbytery acts as “the primary extension of God’s kingdom in that area” (Prior 1951e, p.7)³¹ He concludes with what is, effectively, a statement of Presbyterian belief, not only in terms of church leaders and authority but also of the requirement for the church to “testify for the truth and the law of God”(Prior 1951e p.7) to everyone. It is the presbytery and its actions that enables, for Prior, the Presbyterian church and the individual Presbyterian to be so named. Presbyterian belief is therefore centrally involved in a system of governance and organization. This the Prior of his History of Presbyterianism, the Prior of the *Landfall* history of the Disruption [see Grimshaw 2024a] and Prior the Presbyterian elder in full flight. He is affirming as much to himself, as to his readers, why he is Presbyterian.

²⁹ This author has seen and partaken in a communion service at Knox Theological Hall in the early 1990s when the pacific drink kava (a ceremonial euphoric drink) and the root vegetable taro were substituted for wine and bread; mind you, in another service in the name of the inclusivity of children and wider pastoral theology, Ribena and raisins were used.

³⁰ There is an echo here of the Anglican vicar Kenneth Packard’s description of Prior in 1939 as “a High Church Calvinist”, (Grimshaw 2018, p.198).

³¹ Prior lists its roles: “It judges the qualifications of candidates for the ministry, and sends ministers to their posts; it determines upon the setting-up of new preaching places, and decides what portions of its area are to be served by existing ones; it sees to it that the decisions of the General Assembly are carried out within its bounds; and it may deliver its mind to the community at large on matters of public interest.”(p.7) In this detailed response we see Prior the one-time theological student, Prior the church elder and Prior the historian of the Presbyterian church combine.

'Letters' by readers on the use of Presbyterian and on what liquid is used in a communion service, were answered by Naphtali in a full page set of discussions on April 17 1951. Prior notes that "these lesser names" than 'the Church' "do express real differences" and being so, this is why they are used. While not responding to letters endorsing temperance, he does respond to a letter on the question of communion wine that argues for the joyful and Scriptural use of "fruit of the vine." This, Prior suggests, quoting the preface of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, is a "good Anglican" 'middle way', "which is probably best suited to the present temper of our own denomination." (Prior 1951f) Prior's refusal to engage with the temperance writers signals a clear break from his own Methodist, temperance tradition. Having been a temperance supporter as a child³², as an adult he rejects all such claims³³.

The next column is a turn to more theological questions, dealing with pulpit silence on the subject of heaven and hell. He notes this is not, for lay Christians or Minister a question of 'actual disbelief'³⁴; it is, rather, Naphtali argues a result of the situation that "the hereafter is not as it were as real to any of us, even to ministers, as it was to Christians of an older generation." (Prior 1951g, p.6) But he then proceeds to carefully delineate on the reason and why those advocating for disbelief in heaven are different to those for hell; that is, our moral sense is affronted by the everlasting torment of hell, while belief in immortality raises factors "of a more purely intellectual sort." (Prior 1951g, p.7) These are astronomy and knowledge of space, medical science and the interconnection of our "higher faculties" with "our brains (to say nothing of our glands)" so bodily destruction is the destruction of ourselves. Therefore, while he is careful to state that he is "not suggesting that scientific material is unanswerable", it does require new answers. (Prior 1951g, p.7) Prior also notes there are new moral factors at play, these being (in a very broad-brushing and unacknowledged reference to Marx and religion as the opiate of the masse) the belief that too much a reliance on an afterlife "is

³² In 1930 Prior won an essay competition run by the Masterton No-License League to celebrate the vote by the town to ban the selling of alcohol. Prior's essay outlined "the three best reasons why motorists should be total abstainers, and how New Zealand would benefit by national prohibition." See (Grimshaw 2021, p.37)

³³ For a fictionalised account of how Prior's Methodist past was shook-off in his time as a student at Otago university, see his great friend Dan Davin's novel of Otago University life in the 1930s, *Not Here, Not Now* (1970) in which Prior appears in the guise of the character Ralph Dawson.

³⁴ In this Prior had obviously recovered from his 1942 period of atheism.

a distraction from making the present world better" (Prior 1951g, p.7). Again, this situation and challenge is not for Prior unanswerable, but it does require new answers. This also means a Christian can't draw upon the Bible to support belief in heaven but not belief in hell, rather the "truth" in the Bible needs to be searched for regarding both heaven and hell. He concludes noting "I have raised more questions than I have answered", but hopes to have at least answered the original question. (Prior 1951g, p.7)

The question of "how to love one's neighbor" was the focus of the next column. Noting that the situation seems to be that God commands both too much and not enough, Naphtali offers "two stock answers" (Prior 1951h), love occurs in action not feeling, and Christianity reinforces proper self-love which is self-respect. But, as these are not "entirely satisfactory", Prior notes that love in action as taking "the needs and claims of others as seriously as one takes one's own" is very hard to live up to consistently and so this is why there is "another side" in all God's commandments – and that is a promise. (Prior 1951h). In this Prior argues that the command is actually a promise that we can overcome the problem of not being or feeling able to love the neighbor in this way; in this, we could say, applying philosophy of language to Biblical injunctions. He also warns against "a kind of spurious unselfishness" which is actually "pride" not "love", (Prior 1951h), for we need to be able to receive with grace as much as to give with grace. This column is Prior again (and increasingly) applying logical thinking to a Biblical question, and this is why he moves beyond the stock answer. In many ways this is in debt to *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* in the sense that he applies logical thinking as to how we should act ethically – and biblically.

The question of Protestant–Roman differentiation resumed in the next column, noting there are many differences, including no single Protestantism, nor there being a single point of difference. What is interesting is the degree of Naphtali's anti-Roman sentiment, raising points [regarding the 'it' of Romanism] from Luther ("because it is a kind of Judaism, making our salvation a thing we can bargain about instead of a thing that follows from trust in God") and Calvin ("because it was a kind of idolatry") (Prior 1951i, p.5) and applying them to the current day where Naphtali dislikes "its intolerance" (Prior 1951i, p.5) and its attempted political influence. Here Naphtali raises the issue of the belief that Roman Catholics were behind the suppression of the "How Things Began" radio broadcast for schools that was shut down by the Education

Minister³⁵ in 1947, following complaints regarding its discussion of evolution.³⁶ Prior suggests 'the Romanists' were responsible and asks what Protestant denomination protested its suppression?; but here Prior's anti-Romanism seems to have misled his argument, as protestant fundamentalists were centrally involved³⁷. His wider concern is that a fear of communism – which he shares – results in a failure to oppose Romanist influence and he raises the spectre of, in the future, protestants and others being labeled 'communists' by Romanists if they seek to oppose Romanist 'influence'. He situates all of this anti-Roman sentiment within a divinely-led Protestant "belief in religious liberty" and his opposition to the Romanist "belief that the salvation of men depends, at least in part, on human scheming: and "that makes the Romanist ready to use bad means to help secure (as they think) that end." (Prior 1951i, p.6)

We need to pause here and consider how we can make sense of such deep anti-Catholic bigotry as expressed by Prior in his columns. This is, remember, after he had turned away from his history of Scottish Presbyterianism and was now focused on questions of philosophical logic. That is, he was now a philosopher of logic, having even left religious history and religious philosophy behind in his public intellectual role – except here under the nom de plume. However, he had

³⁵ The Education Minister, Rex Mason (1885-1975) was a lawyer and at this time also Minister of Justice. Interestingly, he and his wife were theosophists – as well as being vegetarians and teetotalers. See:

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4m45/mason-henry-greathead-rex>

³⁶ "How Things Began" was a BBC radio programme for schools that was also broadcast in New Zealand. In 1947 the Education Minister shut down the broadcast of the programme. While Prior blames Catholics it seems that protestant fundamentalists were to the fore; the protest being initiated by the secretary of the New Zealand Evolution Protest movement. As one newspaper report suggested: "The Prime Minister (Mr Fraser) said the attention of the Minister of Education was drawn to the broadcasts by a fundamentalist, and people of that opinion were entitled to have their opinions respected, although they could not force them upon other people. As children matured they should be confronted with all serious theories about man and his history, but it did not follow that young children should be taught in the school curriculum things to which their parents might take strong objection. Care must be exercised in these days to ensure that tyranny of the mind or tyranny of scientific dogma was not substituted for the tyranny of religious intolerance from which we prided ourselves we had escaped." (*Northern Advocate* 31 October 1947, p3.) See:

https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NA19471031.2.24?end_date=31-12-1951&query=%22how+things+began%22&snippet=true&start_date=01-01-1947

³⁷ I am currently undertaking research on the "How Things Began" ban and debate.

also just emerged from a very public and long debate in the pages of the *New Zealand Listener*, arising from his review of *Evolution and Philosophy* by a local priest, Father G.H. Duggan S.M., and this may have coloured his response. (see Grimshaw 2020) Yet this column also alerts us to the degree in which Prior was still very much a Presbyterian at – and of – this time, a protestant defined as much by repudiation of Catholicism as by a decision for Protestantism (we could say both a negating and a positive Protestantism). Finally, he is writing for the official magazine of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand and so is advising all Presbyterians to understand why they are – and it is stated should be – different to Roman Catholics. An afterword to this column occurred in two letters published on June 19, 1951, that Naphtali replied to. The first is in relation to “How Things Began” and asks if the banning of the broadcast was actually “an offence against religious liberty?” (Prior 1951j) Rather, it was suggested, it was an issue of scientific opinion. Naphtali’s brief reply makes two points. The second is his suggestion that the broadcasting of a debate on evolution should have been the option taken, but that the broadcasting authorities are “too timid” to allow the airing of such a controversy. But it is his opening statement that exposes the deep anti-Catholic nature of his theology: “It is surely an unProtestant and illiberal thing to ask the Government to suppress the broadcasting of an opinion that happens to be contrary to one’s own”. (Prior 1951j) He is thereby leaving open again the suggestion that it is Roman Catholic to do so! How can we make sense of this deep anti-Catholic antipathy by one who would claim to be liberal? It is not enough to suggest that this is just a Protestant or a Presbyterian view because, while certainly such, there is something more going on here – and that is the cold war and the recent history of the Catholic church to support authoritarian governments. Prior’s positioning versus the Catholic church as illiberal and repressive is therefore typical of post-war liberalism.³⁸

A different position is expressed in Naphtali’s response to a letter suggesting his column “is characterized by that particular woolliness of expression which we associate with Ecumenism”. Rather, Prior claims, the central difference is that of papal authority and so to challenge ‘Romanism’ on the basis of how Jehovah Witnesses may have been treated or may have suppressed a broadcast is to fail to focus on the

³⁸ For a wider framing of this as expressed in the Cold war liberal journal *Encounter*, see M. Grimshaw, “Encountering Religion: *Encounter*, Religion, and the Cultural Cold War, 1953–1967”, *History of Religions* vol. 51 number 1 August 2011, pp.31-58.

essential difference. Naphtali acknowledges the centrality of papal authority but states that belief as “the TEST” of Romanist belief is not “the SOURCE of all Romanist ends.” He instead aligns himself with the Reformers who “looked for deeper errors underlying this one – and found them”. His point is that the roots of Romanism may also be in Protestants, but that the Protestant looks to reform themselves from such roots and so, hopefully, the fruits of Protestantism are different from the fruits of Romanism.³⁹

Naphtali next turned to the questions of pacifism and the Presbyterian confession of faith that stated Christians must serve in wars when ordered to by the civil powers. (Prior 1951 k) This is an interesting question for Prior to consider because, as is well known he was, in the 1930s and in the 1940s an ardent Christian pacifist, joining PAX in London alongside his first wife Clare. However, on return to New Zealand, alongside his divorce and his documented period of atheism in 1942, Prior also turned away from his pacifism, stating this publicly in an article published in the SCM journal *The Student*. In this he states that like Karl Barth he has been a pacifist but is no longer one, but emphasizing, in conclusion “the truth of Barth’s main contention that the Christian case for the war must be solidly and biblically based, or it is no case at all.” (Prior 1942) Prior had started to consider his pacifism untenable in 1941 and when called up in January 1942 he enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Airforce. Copeland (2022) notes that in his enlistment papers Prior had, under religion stated ‘atheist’; yet by May 1942 we can see he had returned to Presbyterianism and was willing and able to argue – alongside Barth – for a biblically based case for war. Finally joining the Airforce in November 1942, he served as a wireless mechanic in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) in the pacific war theatre, until October 1945⁴⁰. This context is crucial for understanding that Prior’s answer here is intensely personal, it involves discussion he has had with himself and with many of his friends who were or remained pacifists, such as Lex Miller, Basil Dowling, Rodney Kennedy – and his parish minister Bob Sprackett. It is also important to note the editor [and pacifist], Alun Richards, also felt the need to make a separate comment in the pages before Naphtali’s comments. Under the heading “immoral morality”, he notes Naphtali’s

³⁹ All three of the letters Naphtali responds to on this day are written by “R. McIntyre Jun.”

⁴⁰ I’ve drawn heavily here on Jack Copeland’s entry on Arthur Prior in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prior/#PersCourBleaTime>

position is one based on reasons that “are not political but religious”. (Richards 1951 p.4)

Naphtali begins his response by noting that no Presbyterian could “swallow the Confession of Faith whole” and so if rigorous adherence to it was enforced there would be no clergy. But he then adds to this by saying “there are worse departures from it than pacifism.” (Prior 1951k, p.9) Naphtali then focuses on the requirement to follow “lawful” commands and that wars may be waged “upon just and necessary occasions”. (Prior 1951k, p.9) These provisos were agreed to by the reformers and by Luther in agreement with what the medieval church had stipulated. What is lacking today is, Naphtali argues, just this sort of proviso, which adds more nuance to the current legal position which are only that of fighting when told to, or the conscientious objector who refuses to fight in any circumstances. Here we gain a crucial insight into Prior’s own position which shifted from that of the conscientious objector/pacifist to that of the Presbyterian prepared to fight with “just and necessary conditions.” Korea is therefore an unjust and unnecessary war because of the American (and its allies) refusal to meet “some not unreasonable demands of the Government of China.” (Prior 1951k, p.10) But then Prior turns his critique to the failure of the General Assembly and the Public Questions Committee or even a single presbytery to raise its voice in protest both at the New Zealand government’s failure to recognize China or its stated declaration “that ‘where Britain stands, we stand’”. (Prior 1951k, p.10) This is, for Naphtali, far worse than pacifism; for such “silence in the face of evil in high places” is precisely what may involve us in unjust wars. Naphtali is therefore doing a number of things in this short response; on one level he is, for those who know him, expressing a personal explanation of why he stopped being a pacifist. He is also articulating a political theology that prophetically calls both upon individuals and the church to oppose an unjust war, and in doing so reminding them that Presbyterianism is a demand upon how to live in this world and involves questions of how individuals and the church must engage with and respond to other forms of authority. An afterword to this column occurred with Naphtali, on June 19 responding to a letter that asked “wouldn’t it be more honest for each Presbyterian minister to write his own “Confession of Faith”, rather than give the appearance of confessing a faith he does not hold?”⁴¹ Naphtali’s response is that

⁴¹ “Sack Pacifists?” *The Outlook*, [Letter from ‘Loyal’] May 19, 1951 pp.14-15. This ‘letter’ is unlike most other letters published in *The Outlook*, which either have a

ministers are only called upon to believe the “general line” of the Confession, not the whole thing, but he also suggests that an Assembly committee – over some years if necessary – should inquire into the relation of the Church to the Confession so as to provide “some better and less tortuous means” for a minister to state what they believe and agree with. (Prior 1951l, p.15) This is also Prior as elder, churchman – and one-time theological student – drawing on longstanding discussions within the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand regarding the status of the Confession, which had seen the passing of the Declaratory Act in 1893 which Prior is alluding to.

The next Naphtali column was in response to two letters to *The Outlook* on March 29, who asked for a straight answer as to whether “Naphtali believes the Bible to be the word of God.?” Of course, Prior could not and would not provide the requested “yes” or “no”, stating that to do so would be “dishonest”. Rather, he is happy to give a straight answer to a straight question and as an example stated that, if asked if he is a communist his answer is No (Prior 1951m, p.6). Rather, speaking implicitly as a logician, Prior emphasizes the need for translation of that theological question into plain English and proceeds to provide two ‘translations’ as to what such a question in plain English might entail. To the first, which is “whether I believe that God uses the Bible to make His will known to His people?” Prior answers ‘yes’. To the second translation, ‘whether I believe that the Bible, from beginning to end, is a completely accurate report of a series of direct communication from the Almighty?’, Prior answers ‘no’. (Prior 1951m, p.6) To support his second answer he then discusses how he believes the Bible does not make this claim for itself and that it is actually the claim of those who expect that the Bible should be that sort of book, whereas his position is that the Bible has both human error in it and things that are hard to understand. (Prior 1951m, p.7) Yet in answering this, Prior makes another statement of faith, that God has chosen to act in this way and this is also to be experienced in Christ’s teaching via the parables, so that truth and meaning must be, all at the same time, sought, worked for, waited for and prayed for. (Prior 1951m, p.7)

surname or an initial; but also are never as concise with such a clear question. The suspicion arises that this is not ‘a letter’, but rather like many of the others Naphtali replied to (and which McEldowney remember, suggested) is a question supplied by Prior for himself to answer – similar to how he undertook a debate via statements and answers from various positions in some of his early articles.

This question of attempting to understand and relate the Bible to the current day took a new direction in answer to the next question on June 12 as to whether Jesus was a socialist? Prior's answer to this is telling because in doing so he is repudiating, in a confessional manner, earlier elements of his own youthful Christian identity:

"No, our Lord was not a Socialist⁴². Nor was he a pacifist. Nor was he a Prohibitionist or even a teetotaler. And I think we may learn from this that it is a fantastical error to regard any of these causes as being, at all times and in all places, the cause of God. Any of them may be so, all the same, at some time and in some places."

(Prior 1951n)

But he is also careful to state that the Bible is not silent on "social righteousness and social justice, and even social security" – in this last point demonstrating his support for the welfare state – but also that the merits of socialism are one of a number of things that we cannot expect the church to "have, as it were, a corporate voice" on; with his aside: "(I fancy we make too much fuss about Socialism, both ways, anyhow)." (Prior 1951n) However he does state there are "some crying public evils" which the church should not be silent about and these include, in the past, the issue of the Church's silence about Nazism before the outbreak of the war (Prior, influenced by Barth, having publicly opposed Nazism in his writings in the 1930s) and in the current day gives the issue of the "cynical" restoration of power to the Krupps corporation in West Germany. (Prior 1951n) Here as elsewhere Prior is continuing to follow the Public Questions Committee focus of the origin of these columns; he is providing a theological comment and critique not only to broader religious questions but to sociopolitical ones.

The philosophical Prior takes precedent in the next occurrence of Naphtali, where he deals with the question of whether "the latest developments of physical science have disproved materialism"? In answering this, Naphtali says it is rather "that 'matter' is queerer stuff than we thought it was." (Prior 1951o) In relation to this he notes there had been both a physicist's fad that matter wasn't real and only the mind was and a psychologist's fad that there "was no such thing as

⁴² This statement follows his definition of socialism as placing the means of production, distribution and exchange 'under some sort of public ownership'.

consciousness (mind), but only bodily 'behavior'." Naphtali is pleased that "both fads are on their way out." (Prior 1951o) He notes that neither the nonexistence of consciousness or the material world are a Christian doctrine, concluding that such doctrines are "not Christianity, but something more like Hinduism or Buddhism." (Prior 1951o) In this answer Prior is yet again situating himself and his answers as Christian to the core, but Christian in the context of the modern world. The question of why we need doctrine, confessions and catechisms is engaged with in the next column. Prior's answer is to ask in turn why we don't just listen to the Bible being read aloud; that is, why do we have sermons and Sunday schools and bible classes and the like? Why not just give everyone the bible and leave it at that? His answer is that the Bible orders Christians into churches so that they can help each other according to their gifts, and this includes (for most) not only bringing up children in the faith, but also the various gifts of preaching, scriptural translation into new languages (including "twentieth century English"), hymn-writing, teachers of theologians, framers of creeds and catechisms, or writers of commentaries. (Prior 1951p) He also argues for an independence of mind encouraged by the Bible so as not to become "instruments of spiritual laziness or of spiritual tyranny" (Prior 1951p) and so we may even need to be protestants against our teachers. Therefore, nothing written within the faith or the church or by theologians or church leaders is beyond criticism, nor what is preached in a sermon or what our parents tell us, or even what we believe ourselves; but in undertaking Protestant criticism, we all do so, Prior says, within God's family. Prior's obvious target here is fundamentalism, but also yet again, Romanism; for he is also making a very strong protestant statement of the right to protest out of faith and the responsibility of the individual Christian to make the most of their gifts to think their way through their faith and not blindly accept it. He then deals with the question "why Christ?" which arises from how to convince someone who can understand the external God and the Holy Spirit working in a person but not see the need for Christ. (Prior 1951q) Prior begins by arguing for the Trinity against what he states could just as easily be a two god thesis; it is the second person of the trinity that, he claims, enables us to encounter God as Father and in turn that makes us God's children and able to see God the Son in one another, yet also we often fail to do so. It is to overcome such a failure that the Christ entered the world and while this is not "a full theory of the atonement", that is he states, what he is arguing for. (Prior 1951 q) It is this statement that makes

clear that at this stage Prior is still very much a Trinitarian Christian, not just a more general theological thinker.

Naphtali next deals with “the charge that religion is the opium of the people?” (Prior 1951r) For Prior, the starting point – via Marx’s critique – is to “admit this charge is not wholly false.” (Prior 1951r) In fact, because the Bible warns of the issue of true and false religions –and of the perversion of “the true one” – this means “the bible’s language is stronger on this point than any Marxist’s, and stronger than any Marxist’s can be.” (Prior 1951r) Prior also notes that both Coleridge and Kingsley, as Christians, before and at the same time as Marx, used the metaphor of opium or opiate against those who they saw “making a drug of their religion.” (Prior 1951r) Prior argues the Christian has to first ensure they do not themselves do this (make a drug of their religion), but he wishes there were Marxist prophets to warn fellow Marxists “against making a drug of **their** religion” [emphasis in original]. (Prior 1951r) This is then followed by a typical Prior aside: “(It has been remarked that if Christians drug men with the promise of ‘pie in the sky when they die’, the Communists drug men with the promise of ‘pie on the ground when they’re drowned’).” (Prior 1951r) Naphtali states the “alternative to religious hope is despair” and reformers require hope to ensure they do not either give up or reform with a hard and hasty desperation. So, religion can be, but does not need to be, a drug; it can support efforts to make the world better and also prevent indignation from killing Christian kindness.

Naphtali’s next column addressed the question of women elders and women ministers and why the correspondent “doubtful”, though supportive, wonders why they feel there is something “unnatural” about both. (Prior 1951s) Prior (as remember, a new elder) is quick to first position himself as not believing – as some Presbyterians do – that elders are ministers. To understand the issue Prior traces the issue back to the scriptural injunction to think of the relationship of minister to people as reflecting that of Christ to His people. This then gets extended to the relationship of a husband to a wife. To undercut this Prior applies logic; if it is seen unnatural to have a women minister because of this legacy, then logically, a male minister with his own wife “is a kind of bigamist?” (Prior 1951s p.7) Noting that the Romanist’s insistence on a celibate clergy does this, Prior concludes by linking together anti-women Presbyterian views with those of the Romanists in a way designed to offend the then strongly anti-Romanist Presbyterians:

“I’m inclined to think that this Roman Error, and the exclusion of women from the ministry (which, incidentally, is a feature of Romanism too) spring from a common root – taking a metaphor too literally with our hearts if not our minds.”

(Prior 1951s p.7)

There are a number of things occurring in this short passage. Firstly, by using the term Roman and Romanist, not the more usual Roman Catholic Prior is continuing his long-standing argument that there is only one Catholic Church and all denominations are subgroups of it. Therefore no one church can or should make use of the term catholic as an exclusionary one. Secondly, Prior is positioning the Presbyterian church versus a Romanist one that is in error. Thirdly, a Romanist literalist position on Scripture is analogous at times to a protestant fundamentalist one, and both, for Prior are in error and by extension irrational and illogical. Prior’s support for women ministers is therefore also a support for women elders.

Naphtali’s next outing was to reply to two letters that raised issues with Prior’s view on how to interpret scripture in regard to the question of heaven and hell and in regard to whether knowledge of God arises from external sources or, as it is claimed is the case with Naphtali, “that our knowledge of God originates from some inherent faculty of man and that the Bible is therefore the result of man’s mind and spirit seeking to discover God.” (McIntyre 1951 p.10) Prior’s defence of his position is that he has “no cut-and-dried theory as to how God makes Himself known to us though Scripture.” His position is that while the Bible is inspired by God, it was not dictated by God, rather it is written by men and so “there’s a lot that’s plain human error in it.” (Prior 1951t) So while for Prior, God guides our reading of Scripture, it is a human activity of a text written by humans. He then returns to an ongoing comparison asking: “Are we Romanists or Communists that we must have a “final authority” to settle our perplexities and disputes in some automatic fashion?” (Prior 1951t)

The issue of church leadership, raised previously in regard to women then get discussed in terms of “Are Elders Ministers?” (Prior 1951u) For Prior this arises from a dispute about words as to the meaning of “minister” between those who are the minister of the word and sacraments and those who can sit and vote in the courts of the church: Session, Presbytery and General Assembly. If that is what is meant by “minister” then all elders are ministers (and Prior himself would be such

a minister – but he does not state this in his guise as Naphtali). He then extends the debate to “the priesthood of all believers” who are all called to serve in the church and whereby “baptism is a kind of ordination”. The issue is identified as resting on the question of who can be a moderator and participate in the ceremonial laying on of hands for ordaining a minister of the word. Prior personally is for the status quo and the separation of roles between ministers and elders, in part because of the special training for ministers which makes them an ‘expert’. He notes the Presbyterian church does not like untrained ministers and he agrees with this – with a typically Prior concluding coda: “...so long as we don’t think of our ministers as a training in holiness, as if a minister were a sort of ‘professional good man’; (a totally un-Protestant and totally immoral idea).” (Prior 1951u) Prior’s discussion explicitly draws upon his own personal experience. To reiterate for emphasis, in the 1930s he was training to be a minister of word and sacrament but then withdrew (see Grimshaw 2018); but as noted, in 1951, at the time of writing as Naphtali he became an elder in the Presbyterian church [Copeland 2022]⁴³. Before becoming a Presbyterian he was, as a young man, a lay preacher in the Methodist church in Masterton and then as a Presbyterian undertook lay preaching while a theological student. This however stopped when he met and then married Clare Hunter. (Grimshaw 2018) Following his 1942 period of unbelief (Jakobsen 2016) Prior then re-engaged quite quickly with the Presbyterian church and in marrying Mary married the

⁴³ See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prior/#NewMan>

Prior was ordained as Kirk Elder into the St Martin’s Presbyterian church, Christchurch. The minister was his friend from SCM days in the 1930s and 1940s Robert Sprackett (1916-1993), who was also a second cousin to Mary Prior (Kenney p.331). Sprackett trained in Knox Theological Hall 1941-1943 and was a conscientious objector in WW2, asking to serve in a ‘difficult’ parish [Reefton on the West Coast of the South Island] so his exemption from war service was not to be seen as a ‘soft-option’. While there, he also started a local news sheet. Sprackett was minister at St Martins 1952-1962 and like Prior, was a passionate and determined supporter of Church Union. When this failed to occur, Sprackett resigned from the Presbyterian church and then worked for refugee resettlement for the Australian Council of Churches, before returning to parish ministry in Auckland in 1971. [see his entry in: <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/archives/Page200.htm>] Sprackett’s pacifism and focus on the social gospel would have provided many connections and discussions with Prior. It is not mere conjecture to suggest that it was having Sprackett as his parish minister that enabled Prior to become and remain a Kirk Elder. As Copeland discusses, Prior continued this role until 1958, but seems – along with Mary – to have been cooling in his connection to Presbyterian and wider Christianity from the mid-1950s, in part it seems occasioned by the 1956 sabbatical in Oxford. (Copeland 2022)

daughter (and granddaughter) of a Presbyterian minister; for Mary's mother was the daughter of the noted Presbyterian clergyman Andrew Cameron. For a time, Arthur and Mary were deeply involved as lay members of the Presbyterian church, including being members of various church committees. However, upon leaving New Zealand for Manchester Prior withdrew from the church and ceased his formal participation. Yet it is clear that at this time of being 'Naphtali' Prior was a deeply involved member of the Presbyterian church and this was recognized by other church members, for you are asked to be an elder [the church belief is that eldership, like minister of word and sacrament, is a calling by God] and likewise appointed to church committees.

In October 1951 Naphtali addressed the question of whether it is the result or the motive that matters for the Christian. The supposed 'letter' is from 'Kiwī' who has an Australian cousin who states doing the right thing is more important than the motive. Not only did Prior have Australian cousins, he had attended the Australasian Philosophy Congress, held in Sydney 21-25 August 1951, where he gave his paper "the Ethical Copula" (Prior 1951v). Therefore, the origin of the question was most probably occasioned by that visit to Australia, but whether it was a cousin or a philosophical colleague who raised it remains a moot point. Prior begins by stating that someone who does the right thing from the wrong motive "is to that extent a bad man". (Prior 1951w) But for him the question is rather "What ought we try to do – to have good motives, or to do the right thing?" In his answer he combines both philosophical ethical thinking and Christian ethical thinking, raising the point that the person of good motives is not continuously thinking about them " but rather about the thing to be done"; in other words not about their intentions but what do others need? Prior then states the Christian must of course continue to examine their motives for action and should be aware of what he terms "these 'sources of error' in ourselves and allow for their effect." (Prior 1951w) Therefore, one should neither engage in "morbid" worry about motives but neither engage in "a spiritual issue" to act with "a serene confidence in our own rightness" (Prior 1951w). His conclusion is a deeply theological one of being aware of the veil in one's own heart so that the Christian can both love their fellow sinner and know of their own need for God's help. It is clear from this that Prior, at this stage, is a deeply committed Christian thinker and believer as well as being a philosopher.

Prior's last column addresses his perennial issue, stretching back to his time writing for *Open Windows* and *The Student*, as to what is meant by

'the church'. (Prior 1951x) In this case arising from a question as to what Christ meant by 'His Church'⁴⁴. For Prior, this is no denominational church – whether Presbyterian or Roman – “but the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Prior 1951x) Prior’s response continues his longstanding opposition to any Roman claims of preference or authority: “There have been times in the history of the Church when Presbyterianism was not known, and there may be such times again; though there was a Presbytery in Jerusalem – a council of ministers there– before there was ever a Pope in Rome, and there may be a Presbytery in Jerusalem when there are Popes in Rome no longer.” (Prior 1951x) But having made this statement Prior concludes by saying the church is wherever the people of Christ are gathered, in unreferenced repetition of Matthew 18:20 “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

And with this, Prior’s turn as Naphtali concludes.

Conclusion

As for why Prior stopped being Naphtali, all we can do is conjecture from what we do know. Firstly, that in November and early December 1951 he was completing his long unpublished manuscript (of around 220,000 words)⁴⁵ of *The Craft of Formal Logic* (Markoska-Cubrinovska, 2016)⁴⁶. Secondly, in 1952 he switched his focus to symbolic logic and published 4 papers on this in that year.⁴⁷ Thirdly, as Kenney notes (Kenny 1970, 332-334) from 1952 Prior began to be more involved in the philosophical world, both within New Zealand and Australia and, internationally via detailed correspondence; while he also became Professor of Philosophy that same year upon the death of Professor Sutherland. At the same time, at Canterbury philosophy became

⁴⁴ While not referenced as Matthew 16:18; this is what is referred to in the question. This question is raised by “Hornet” and is, I would suggest another example of Prior asking a question for himself to answer.

⁴⁵ Kenney 1970, p.332. Kenney notes it was completed 6 December 1951

⁴⁶ As Copeland (2022) notes, this did not make it into a published manuscript, Clarendon Press wanting (14 months after submission) a book both shorter and with greater emphasis on Modern logic. The rewrite became a different book, published in 1955 as *Formal Logic*.

⁴⁷ Prior’s papers are: 1952a, ‘Modality De Dicto and Modality De Re’, *Theoria*, vol. 18, pp. 174–180.

1952b, ‘In What Sense is Modal Logic Many-Valued?’, *Analysis*, vol. 12, pp. 138–143.

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1952d, ‘The Parva Logicalia in Modern Dress’, *Dominican Studies*, vol. 5, pp. 78–87.

separated off from Psychology. Finally, Prior's forays into journalism had tended to occur as ways of him thinking his ways through things (Grimshaw 2020; Grimshaw 2023), in much the way he used his copious correspondence – whether theological or philosophical.

Prior as Naphtali can in part therefore be understood as Prior writing and thinking his way toward and into becoming an Elder in the Presbyterian church. Having thought and written himself into such a public commitment, he had no need to make use of what Naphtali offered. However, Prior's time as Naphtali does enable us to see the degree to which Prior's theological thinking and Christian faith continued into the 1950s. The nom de plume column enabled Prior to separate his two worlds: the philosopher and the theologian, the academic and the public intellectual. It also enabled the philosopher to write publicly as a Christian apologist, or as suggested, a public Kirk Elder. We also need to remember that since the 1930s Prior had attempted in different ways to be a religious journalist. It is clear from his career Naphtali was his last attempt to do, with the nom-deplume providing a compartmentalized separation from both Prior the academic philosopher and from Prior the public intellectual.

Yet because Prior's Christianity (and in fact more so, his Presbyterianism) was based in theology as much as practice, it can be suggested that just as he thought himself into Christianity and then into Presbyterianism, he then also, it appears was able, from 1952 – via symbolic logic – to think his way out of it as well.

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