

This is Michael Ots at his best! Making Sense of Life addresses how we make meaning out of life – from our need for identity, purpose, and love, to our longing for justice and peace in the world. He shows us why the Christian faith makes the best sense of life – in a way that is accessible, easy to read and thought provoking. Read it for yourselves and then give it to everyone you know who is trying to make sense out of life!

Rebecca Manley Pippert, author, *Stay Salt* and *Out of the Salt Shaker*

Honest, refreshing, engaging, and powerful – if you're genuinely interested in making sense of life's deepest questions, this book is a great place to start.

Andy Bannister, Director, the Solas Centre;
author and speaker

In his latest book, Making Sense of Life, Michael Ots weaves together a compelling case for the Christian faith, pointing us in the right direction to find true purpose and meaning. I highly recommend reading this book and sharing it with others.

Dr Amy Orr-Ewing, author and speaker

Michael Ots has spent 20 years speaking and listening on university campuses across Britain and Europe. He knows what the big questions of life are, and if you turn to the contents page I'm certain you'll find at least three chapter headings

which deal with subjects that you find both beckoning and bewildering. The chapters themselves are full of wisdom, illustration and breadth, which did not disappoint. I thoroughly recommend this most timely book, as we all try and make sense of a post-COVID world.

Rico Tice, Minister, All Souls Church; co-founder,
Christianity Explored

Many years ago I saw a poster as I entered Heathrow airport near London, which had an image of a plane at take-off and the text underneath, "Where in the world are you going?" Michael Ots is answering the same question in this book. He provides honest, thoughtful and deeply satisfying answers to the most urgent deeply-felt existential questions of our day... answers which are found in the person of Jesus Christ and all that He has to offer to those trying to make sense of the world and our place in it. The honest seeker will find great riches here. Enjoy!

Lindsay Brown, Director, Fellowship of Evangelists in
the Universities of Europe

Michael Ots is an astute observer of society who has carefully analysed the aspirations of contemporary people and made a compelling case for considering the Christian approach to life.

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ,
Sri Lanka; author, *Discipling in a Multicultural World*

Making Sense of Life

MICHAEL OTS

10 Publishing

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Acknowledgements

I used to quip that my books seem to come out like the Olympics – every four years. That cycle seemed to have been broken though, as it is now five years since the publication of my last book, *But Is It True?* However, with the delay of the Tokyo Olympics, I seem to have inadvertently kept to this pattern!

I was once asked why I didn't write more often – one reason is that all my books started life as talks that were given at universities over a period of several years. I am therefore thankful to the many university student groups around Europe that have invited me to speak on these topics, in particular to the Christian Union in the University of Leeds who first came up with many of the talk titles that now form the chapters of this book. I'm also grateful to the many students who have asked insightful and challenging questions after my talks. In doing so they have encouraged me to go back and think even more deeply about each issue. As it is not possible to hold a Q&A after each chapter of the book, I have sought to anticipate and incorporate many of these questions as we go along.

Another reason for not writing more often is that I need to give my friends a break! Writing a book like this really is a team effort, and I am deeply grateful to all those who have contributed to the process.

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INTRODUCTION

Making sense of life

It was 2 a.m. and I found myself in tears as I sat on a mattress on the floor of my friend's office in New Zealand. I had intended to go to sleep hours beforehand, but I had made the mistake of starting to read Paul Kalanithi's memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*. It is one of the most profound, moving and heartbreaking books I have ever read.

In the book, he vividly describes his own battle with cancer alongside his work as a neurosurgeon, his marriage and the birth of their child. Despite the fact that I read the entire book knowing that he was going to die (for it had been published posthumously), I found myself willing there to be a different ending. As his wife took over to write the last chapter, describing their final hours together, I found I couldn't hold back the tears.

As he faced up to the reality of his own mortality, Paul Kalanithi started to reevaluate his own beliefs about the world. Being a young medical student, he had embraced a materialistic view of the world, as he explained: 'I, like most scientific types, came to believe in the possibility of the material conception of reality, an ultimately scientific

worldview that would grant a complete metaphysics, minus outmoded concepts like souls, God, and bearded white men in robes.¹ That is, he believed that the only things that really existed were those that could be explained scientifically. Matter was all that existed; there was nothing more, certainly no God or spiritual realm.

While I often find such a view can be very popular in a lecture hall, it is harder to sustain it in the day-to-day realities of life. All of us will go through moments when we are forced to face up to life's big questions.

There can be any number of triggers for these moments of existential wondering.

For some, it is the reality of death. Living through a global pandemic certainly has a way of making us ask questions.

For others, it is the wonder of life that gets them thinking. One of the deepest conversations that I ever had with one of my neighbours was the day his first child was born. Being confronted with the miraculous bundle of life he now held in his arms had made him ask questions about his own life and the purpose of it.

Beauty is another common trigger. One of my favourite places in the world is the Lauterbrunnen Valley in Switzerland. It was here that J.R.R. Tolkien found inspiration for the magical, elvish land of Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*. It's not hard to see why. A total of seventy-two waterfalls cascade down the 400-metre-high cliffs on either side of the lush green valley, while the snowclad 4000-metre-high summit of the Jungfrau towers above.

I remember sitting at the edge of one of those cliffs one summer's evening to watch the sunset. As I was drinking in the view, I got chatting to a couple who had just appeared nearby. Although we had never met before, the beauty of the scene in front of us was such that we ended up having the kind of deep conversation that, for the average Brit, would normally take years of friendship (or a lot of alcohol) to achieve! Was this beauty that we were appreciating just the end result of time and chance? Or did it point to something beyond itself?

While such beauty may be a trigger for some, the utter brokenness of the world causes others to question what life is all about. For many in the West, the real shock of the Covid-19 pandemic was that, for the first time, we couldn't just switch off the TV news and go back to normal life. There was no 'normal life'. Many have suffered immense loss, battled illness or suffered from the terrible impact of isolation and loneliness. Most of us westerners had homes to live in, food to eat and Netflix to watch (which was a lot more than many in the world had), but something seemed to be missing. There has to be more to life than simply not dying, but what is it?

Concern about the injustices and inequalities of our world can cause us to think more deeply about life too. Why is our world so unfair and how can we improve it? Many of us want to feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Changes in life's circumstances, like redundancy or retirement, also lead us to ask big questions. In our

society, so much of our identity is bound up with our job. ‘What do you do?’ is usually the first question we ask someone when we meet for the first time. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with this, a problem arises when we don’t have anything ‘to do’. Who are we then? My wife was recently chatting to a colleague who, like her, was facing the very real threat of redundancy in the aviation industry – a job that they both love. Just a couple of weeks before, he had seemed so secure and confident. Now he was crippled with anxiety and living with the help of antidepressants.

How do we make sense of life in times like this? Why do we think that life is so valuable? Where do we find a true and lasting sense of identity? Why do we long for meaningful and lasting relationships? From where does our concern about this physical world come? Why do we feel that life is so broken? Why is it so hard to live without hope? How can we experience real freedom?

In addition, where can we turn to in order to find answers to these questions? Does our view of the world account for these things that we care so much about?

As I chat to university students across Europe, I have found that many have a similar worldview to the one that Paul Kalanithi had. Most wouldn’t think much about God – if at all. It’s not that they are hostile to God, like a previous generation of angry New Atheists would have been. They simply don’t see how God has much to do with anything.

Ultimately, if they were pushed, they would likely say that the only stuff that really exists is what we can see,

touch and test. If we want to discover truth about our world, they would state that it is the objectivity of science, rather than religion, that will give us the answers.

The technical term for such an idea is *materialism* – the belief that matter is ultimately all that exists. Most wouldn't use the term, and some maybe haven't even heard of it. Yet, for many, it describes the functional view they have of the world.

Most people find that holding this view of the world works just fine for the majority of their life. It is easy at university to be a materialist, as many in academia hold to the same view. We find that we can get through our studies just fine, without any appeal to the supernatural to understand our course. It is easy to keep holding the view after we graduate as well. After all, if you live in a Western country, materialism is the shared assumption of many in society. We can get a job, buy a house, get married, have kids and lead a successful life without ever having to think about God.

However, when life's circumstances cause us to start asking some of the bigger questions, does our view of the world give us answers? Does it account for the things that *really* matter?

Paul Kalanithi ultimately found that it doesn't. He discovered that his functional atheism just didn't explain those things that he really cared about. He concluded, 'The problem, however, eventually became evident; to make science the arbiter of metaphysics is to banish not only God from the world but also love, hate, meaning

– to consider a world that is self-evidently not the world we live in.²

So much of what is most important to us in life is very hard to explain by science alone. Over the coming chapters, we will look at some of these things: our desire for happiness, love, freedom and hope; our need for identity and purpose; our concerns about human rights; our society and the environment. We will see how materialism struggles to provide answers for *why* these things are so important.

One of the longest running and most successful advertising slogans in history is: ‘There are some things money can’t buy ... for everything else there’s Mastercard.’ Fascinatingly, it is based on reminding viewers of the limitations of the very thing they are seeking to advertise! We may want to say something similar about science. Just as there are some things that money can’t buy, there are some things that science can’t explain. This is not to belittle science or scientists. It is simply to realise that there might be more to life than meets the eye.

Could it be that all these things are more fully explained by taking into account the possibility of a God? And not just any God, but the God who revealed himself as Jesus? This possibility may seem a surprising direction to take. While love, freedom, human rights and the environment figure very highly in our concerns, God is often a long way down the list (if he is there at all). Yet I hope to demonstrate that it is the Christian faith that makes best sense of what matters most.

A note about the rest of the book

While you can read this book in the typical manner – from cover to cover – you may also read it in whatever order you like. Feel free to start with whichever chapter interests you the most.

As you read, you'll notice that, at some point in each chapter, I quote from the Bible. I do so quite unapologetically. If you want to understand Christianity, you really need to look at Jesus Christ. (The clue is in the name – *Christ*-ianity!) To understand Jesus, the best place to start is one of the contemporary accounts of his life, which are often referred to as 'the gospels'. They form the first four books (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of the second half of the Bible (which we call the New Testament). We will look particularly at these books.

If you have questions about their historical accuracy, then you may want to look at my book *But Is It True?*³ Yet don't feel you need to deal with all of these questions before you can go any further. Let me explain why.

I recently bought a new pair of binoculars because our apartment overlooked the River Thames and I wanted to be able to watch the wildlife on and around it. The salesman spent a long time telling me all the technical specifications of these particular binoculars and why they were better than the others – and worth spending considerably more money on too! Not knowing much about binoculars, his words made little sense to me. What really sold them to me was that when I picked them up

and had a look through them, I could instantly see that they were indeed superior to all the rest.

In the same way, if you want to know whether the Bible is worth taking seriously, there are two ways you can do this: you can ask technical questions about its accuracy and historicity, or you can start by looking into it and see what you find. As I have done both, I have not only found that the Bible stands up to historical scrutiny, but also discovered that it tells a story that – compared to all others – really does make best sense of the things that matter most.