



IRIS MURDOCH TODAY

Iris Murdoch  
RESEARCH  
CENTRE

# Iris Murdoch and the Western Theological Imagination

*Edited by* Miles Leeson · Frances White

palgrave  
macmillan

# Iris Murdoch Today

## Series Editors

Miles Leeson

Iris Murdoch Research Centre

University of Chichester

Chichester, UK

Frances White

Iris Murdoch Research Centre

University of Chichester

Chichester, UK

The aim of this series is to publish the best scholarly work in Murdoch studies by bringing together those working at the forefront of the field. Authors and editors of volumes in the series are internationally-recognised scholars in philosophy, literature, theology, and related humanities and interdisciplinary subjects. Including both monographs and contributed volumes, the series is scholarly rigorous and opens up new ways of reading Murdoch, and new ways to read the work of others with Murdoch in mind. The series is designed to appeal not only to Murdoch experts, but also to scholars with a more general interest in the subjects under discussion.

Miles Leeson • Frances White  
Editors

# Iris Murdoch and the Western Theological Imagination

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editors*

Miles Leeson  
University of Chichester  
Chichester, West Sussex, UK

Frances White  
University of Chichester  
Chichester, West Sussex, UK

ISSN 2731-331X

ISSN 2731-3328 (electronic)

Iris Murdoch Today

ISBN 978-3-031-92260-2

ISBN 978-3-031-92261-9 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-92261-9>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2025, corrected publication 2025

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

## PREFACE

Edited collections are never just the work of the editors and contributors, many share in the production of the finished work, and it is to them that this work is dedicated. We are blessed with an international support network in Iris Murdoch studies that enables individuals to flourish, and for works such as this to be published.

The conception of the ‘Iris Murdoch Today’ series, of which this is the second edited collection, first came about at the Centenary Conference in Oxford in July 2019, where it became clear that work in the field had shifted so significantly, and the critical mass of academics and readers involved had increased so significantly, for a new era of publishing in this area to begin. Aside from Paul Fiddes’ recent *Iris Murdoch and the Others* (T&T Clark, 2021), there has been very little work published on Iris Murdoch and theology in the past decade, so we are delighted to be able to bring together a diverse range of materials in this volume. Whilst all of these chapters have their roots in Murdoch’s theological thoughts, they also draw on her literary, philosophical, and personal writings and history to enhance our vision of her work. We are in no doubt that the future of Murdoch studies is in safe hands, and the wealth of material on display in this collection not only showcases what we believe to be the range of excellence currently produced but also points towards new avenues of thought and investigation for later monographs and collections in this series.

Our thanks go firstly to our families who have lived with Iris as a constant presence for longer than they may care to remember. We also need to extend our gratitude to Dayna Miller, Kington University’s archivist

who has been a constant source of support and inspiration, and Heather Robbins, Research Centre administrator and technical support, upon whom we rely not only for day-to-day practicalities but also for organisational and promotional support for this and many other ongoing projects. We also want to thank Anne Rowe, for her timely guidance and advice, and the good humour and support of the other members of the Research Centre Team.

We are also grateful to our publishing team at Palgrave Macmillan, Brendan George, Amy Invernizzi, and Raju Heggidi, for their support and guidance in bringing this (and other works in the series) to completion.

Chichester, UK

Miles Leeson  
Frances White

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	Miles Leeson and Frances White	
	<i>Overview of Previous Research</i>	1
	<i>Part I: Christianity</i>	3
	<i>Part II: Individual Texts, Dialogues and People</i>	6
	<i>Part III: Pushing Out the Boundaries</i>	9
	<i>References</i>	13
<b>Part I</b>	<b>Christianity</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Murdoch and the ‘Mystical Christ’: A Dialogue with Christian Theology</b>	<b>17</b>
	Paul S. Fiddes	
	<i>The Emergence of the Idea of ‘The Mystical Christ’</i>	18
	<i>The Mystical Christ and the Buddha</i>	22
	<i>The Mystical Christ and the Dialogue with Theology</i>	26
	<i>A Mystical Buddha-Nature and the Mystical Christ</i>	33
	<i>References</i>	38
<b>3</b>	<b>Despite Herself: Iris Murdoch, Reluctant Christian?</b>	<b>41</b>
	Frances White	
	<i>Overview of the Terrain</i>	41
	<i>Iris Murdoch’s Neo-Theology</i>	42

	<i>Influences and Counterinfluences</i>	45
	<i>Evidence from Murdoch's Interviews</i>	48
	<i>Evidence from Murdoch's Letters</i>	50
	<i>Evidence from Murdoch's Journals</i>	52
	<i>Reluctant Christian: A Bold Claim</i>	62
	<i>References</i>	65
<b>4</b>	<b>Christian Readers in England and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch, 1948-c.1982</b>	<b>67</b>
	Peter Webster	
	<i>Introduction</i>	67
	<i>Murdoch and the Discipline of Theology</i>	68
	<i>Metaphysics and the Absence of God</i>	70
	<i>Aesthetics</i>	74
	<i>Ethics</i>	78
	<i>Conclusion</i>	83
	<i>References</i>	85
<b>5</b>	<b>'Quakerish Lady?' Iris Murdoch and the Religious Society of Friends</b>	<b>89</b>
	Tasha Alden	
	<i>The Development of Liberal Quakerism</i>	92
	<i>BMB'S Quakerism</i>	94
	<i>Badminton as a Quaker School</i>	99
	<i>'Unfinished Business': Where Are the Quakers in Murdoch's Theological Imagination?</i>	104
	<i>References</i>	111
<b>Part II</b>	<b>Individual Texts, Dialogues and People</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Iris Murdoch and the Book of Job</b>	<b>117</b>
	Daniel Read	
	<i>The Importance of the Book of Job and the Bible: Initial Encounters Part One</i>	118
	<i>Murdoch's Oxford Tutors: Initial Encounters Part Two</i>	120
	<i>First Documented Engagements</i>	122
	<i>Murdoch's Engagement Deepens: The 1960s</i>	124

	<i>The 1980s and Onwards</i>	127
	<i>References</i>	135
<b>7</b>	<b>The Good Life: Iris Murdoch and Medieval Theology</b>	<b>137</b>
	Matthew J. Mills	
	<i>Rediscovering the Ultimate Good</i>	140
	<i>Living a Good Life</i>	144
	<i>Conclusion</i>	154
	<i>References</i>	156
<b>8</b>	<b>'God's Spies': Iris Murdoch and Dame Julian of Norwich</b>	<b>159</b>
	Anne Rowe	
	<i>Veridical Visions</i>	162
	'So Wicked Yet So Much Loved': <i>On The Forgiveness of Sin</i>	165
	'Hazel Nut. No Rest in This Small Thing. Naughted of All Made'	168
	<i>Unconditional Love: 'Body as Fine Purse. Lover Encloses as Body. Goodness'</i>	173
	'Blood. Drops of Blood': <i>Murder in the Black Prince (1973)</i>	176
	<i>Postscript: 'Love Is My Meaning'. 'All Shall Be Well and All Shall Be Well and All Manner of Thing Shall Be Well' (JN 1998, 79)</i>	178
	<i>References</i>	181
<b>9</b>	<b>Murdoch's MacKinnon: The Grounding of <i>Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals</i></b>	<b>183</b>
	Miles Leeson	
	<i>References</i>	201
<b>Part III</b>	<b>Pushing Out the Boundaries</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>'The Point at Which Plato Starts Making Jokes': Religion in <i>The Fire and the Sun</i></b>	<b>205</b>
	Hannah Marije Altorf	
	<i>References</i>	215

<b>11</b>	<b>Forgiveness and the ‘Beautiful, Unexpected Strangeness of the World’ in Iris Murdoch</b>	<b>219</b>
	Scott H. Moore	
	<i>Forgiveness in Murdoch’s Philosophical Work</i>	221
	<i>Forgiveness as Performative</i>	222
	<i>What Is Forgiveness?</i>	223
	<i>Forgiving Others</i>	224
	<i>Forgiving Oneself</i>	227
	<i>Forgiving the Past</i>	230
	<i>Conclusion</i>	232
	<i>References</i>	234
<b>12</b>	<b>Seeing More Than We Are Supposed to: Iris Murdoch and the Occult</b>	<b>235</b>
	Rob Hardy	
	<i>‘The Black Tide of Mud’</i>	244
	<i>Seeing ‘More Than We Are Supposed To’</i>	252
	<i>References</i>	254
<b>13</b>	<b>‘In Good Company’: Dispersal and Gathering in Murdoch’s <i>The Bell</i> and Tarkovsky’s <i>Andrei Rublev</i></b>	<b>257</b>
	Andrew Taylor	
	<i>References</i>	276
	<b>Correction to: ‘Quakerish Lady?’ Iris Murdoch and the Religious Society of Friends</b>	<b>C1</b>
	Tasha Alden	
	<b>Index</b>	<b>277</b>

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Tasha Alden** is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary British Fiction at Aberystwyth University. Her first monograph, *Reading Behind the Lines: Postmemory, History, Story* (MUP, 2014), focused on postmemory as a lens through which to understand innovation in recent historical fiction. She has also written on Sarah Waters, Pat Barker, David Jones, Adam Thorpe, Ian McEwan, and Emma Donoghue, and is currently working on queer form in the work of Jackie Kay, form and grace in the works of Marilynne Robinson and Iris Murdoch, language and metaphor in fertility treatment, and the uses of the past in contemporary queer writing.

**Hannah Marije Altorf** is Visiting Research Fellow at the Iris Murdoch Research Centre, University of Chichester. She has written on the philosophical and literary works of Iris Murdoch and on different forms of philosophical dialogue. She is the author of *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (Continuum, 2008), and together with Mariëtte Willemsen she translated *The Sovereignty of Good* into Dutch (Boom, 2003). They are currently working on the Dutch translation of *The Fire and the Sun*.

**Paul S. Fiddes** is Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Oxford, Emeritus Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford, and a fellow of the British Academy. His works on theology and literature include *Freedom and Limit* (1991), *The Promised End* (2000), *Iris Murdoch and the Others* (2021), and *More Things in Heaven and Earth: Shakespeare, Theology and the Interplay of Texts* (2022).

**Rob Hardy** is an honorary professor at Henan Normal University, China, and a visiting fellow at the Iris Murdoch Research Centre, University of Chichester. His main publications are *Psychological and Religious Narratives in Iris Murdoch's Fiction* (Edwin Mellen, 2000); *Men's Yearning Anger Towards Women in the Writings of D.H. Lawrence, Dion Fortune and Ted Hughes* (Edwin Mellen, 2015); *Pearl S. Buck's Novels of China and America: The Battle of Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

**Miles Leeson** is the director of the Iris Murdoch Research Centre, University of Chichester. He is the author or editor of *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2010), *Incest in Contemporary Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2018), *Iris Murdoch: A Centenary Celebration* (Sabrestorm: 2019), the co-editor of *Iris Murdoch and the Literary Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) and *Iris Murdoch's Selected Poetry* (Chatto and Windus, 2025). He is the lead editor of the forthcoming *The Oxford Handbook of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford University Press), the Lead Editor of the *Iris Murdoch Review*, the host of the Iris Murdoch Podcast, and series co-editor of 'Iris Murdoch Today' with Palgrave Macmillan.

**Matthew J. Mills** is Vice-Principal of St Cuthbert's Society and an honorary fellow in the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham. He has also held several lectureships within the University of Oxford and remains a senior member of Regent's Park College. His latest book is a study of medieval Mariology, *Blessed Mary and the Monks of England: Benedictines and Cistercians, 1000–1215* (Catholic University of America Press, 2024).

**Scott H. Moore** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Great Texts at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, USA. He is the author of numerous essays and, most recently, the books *How to Burn a Goat: Farming with the Philosophers* (Baylor University Press, 2019) and a new edition of Petrarch's *The Life of Solitude (De vita solitaria)*.

**Daniel Read** holds a PhD from Kingston University, London (2019), where he now lectures. He is also an editor of and contributor to the *Iris Murdoch Review*. His monograph, *Degrees of Evil in Iris Murdoch's Fiction and Philosophy* (2025), is being published as part of the 'Iris Murdoch Today' series by Palgrave Macmillan.

**Anne Rowe** is Visiting Professor at the University of Chichester and Emeritus Research Fellow with the Iris Murdoch Archive Project at Kingston University. She has published widely on Iris Murdoch, including *Iris Murdoch and the Visual Arts* (2002) and, most recently, *Iris Murdoch: Writers and Their Work* (Liverpool University Press, 2019).

**Andrew Taylor** is an Anglican priest and a research associate at the Centre for Religion and Culture, based at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford. He also serves as a locum priest for the Diocese in Europe.

**Peter Webster** is a historian of twentieth-century British Christianity. He has published widely on Christian responses to the creative arts, and the shifts in English theology in a secularising society. During the working day, he is Head of Digital Scholarship and Innovation in the library of the University of Southampton.

**Frances White** is a visiting research fellow and deputy director of the Iris Murdoch Research Centre at the University of Chichester, editor of the *Iris Murdoch Review*, and writer-in-residence at Kingston University Writing School. She has published widely on Iris Murdoch and other writers. Her prize-winning biography *Becoming Iris Murdoch* was published in 2014 (Kingston University Press) and her monograph, *Iris Murdoch and Remorse: Beyond Forgiving?*, was published in 2023 (Palgrave Macmillan). She is Series Co-Editor of 'Iris Murdoch Today' with Palgrave Macmillan.



## CHAPTER 1

---

# Introduction

*Miles Leeson and Frances White*

### OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Scholarly interest in theological aspects of Iris Murdoch's fiction and philosophy was slow to develop. It was thirty years after her writing debut that the first work taking detailed notice of the theological language deployed by this overtly atheist author appeared when, in 1983, Peter S. Hawkins wrote *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch*; and it was a further decade before theologians began to engage with Murdoch's work together. Following a conference at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1994, Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker edited *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (1996). This remained, for many years, the most important work on Murdoch's theology, contains vital work by renowned scholars such as Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor and is still much cited today. The following year Dominican Fergus Kerr's work of 1997, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, includes Murdoch. But it was not until the twenty-first century that this aspect of

---

M. Leeson • F. White (✉)

University of Chichester, Chichester, West Sussex, UK

e-mail: [m.leeson@chi.ac.uk](mailto:m.leeson@chi.ac.uk)

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature  
Switzerland AG 2025

M. Leeson, F. White (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Western  
Theological Imagination*, Iris Murdoch Today,

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-92261-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-92261-9_1)

Murdoch's thought and imagination began to receive sustained attention. In 2000 Robert Hardy published *Psychological and Religious Narratives in Iris Murdoch's Fiction* and in 2001 Benedictine Mark Patrick Hederman revealed the depth of her influence on his life and community in *The Haunted Inkwell: Art and Our Future*.

Murdoch's neo-theology has received increasing scrutiny in the wake of the 'turn to theology' which has grown in influence since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The first of the Palgrave Macmillan collections, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (2007) begins with a section, 'Reinstating Theology', with essays by Maria Antonaccio, Stephen Mulhall and Suguna Ramanathan. The following two volumes, *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (2010) and *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* (2012) extend this thread with essays by Anne Rowe, Pamela Osborn, Tammy Grimshaw and William Schweiker in 'Morality without God: Iris Murdoch's Secular Theology' in the former; by Don Cupitt (a contentious Anglican theologian who also knew Murdoch) and Heather Widdows in 'Theological and Visionary Contests' in the latter. A body of work on Murdoch's theological perspectives was thus beginning to be built up in a piecemeal fashion.

Her influence is also found in works with a broader range such as Norman Vance's *Bible & Novel: Narrative Authority & the Death of God* (2013) and Frank England's *Fictions of God* (2020). Murdoch's theological stance is compared and contrasted with other novelists, in Donna Lazenby's *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch* (2014) and in Judith Maltby and Alison Shell's *Anglican Women Novelists: From Charlotte Brönte to P.D. James* (2019), and with professional theologians in Julia T. Meszaros's *Selfless Love and Human Flourishing in Paul Tillich and Iris Murdoch* (2016). Scott H. Moore grasped the nettle in the Appendix—'Iris Murdoch's Vexed Relationship with Christian Faith'—to his *How to Burn a Goat: Farming with the Philosophers* (2019). *The Murdochian Mind* (2022), edited by Mark Hopwood and Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, the largest compendium on Murdoch to date (in the Routledge Philosophical Minds series), includes Part 4, 'Art, Religion and Politics', and, also in 2022, Paul S. Fiddes brought out the first sustained monograph on Murdoch and theology, *Iris Murdoch and the Others: A Writer in Dialogue with Theology*. This new collection in the 'Iris Murdoch Today' series seeks to build on this foundation, begun forty years ago, and to expand the work in this area of Murdoch studies which has lately been gathering momentum. The chapters included here take the debate in new directions.

Whilst it is difficult to untangle the complex connections between Murdoch's philosophy and theology—as the chapters presented here make plain—it is worth noting that in Murdoch's view traditional religious beliefs lost their ability to connect with life in postwar Europe. Her advocacy of an essentially religious picture of human beings as benighted and ego-ridden, in urgent need of transformation, is one that resonates with a post-Christian standpoint. Her constant refrain of 'how can we become morally better?' resonates throughout her published work in all its forms; a question that is central to both theologians and Platonists. It is her drawing together of a multitude of different thinkers on the subject, and her task of considering how metaphysics can be a guide to morals in a post-Christian age, which makes her a compelling voice today.

## PART I: CHRISTIANITY

Part I of this collection, Christianity, examines in depth Murdoch's interaction with Christ, Christianity, the Anglican Church and the Religious Society of Friends. In Chap. 2 Paul Fiddes extends his ground-breaking previous work on Murdoch's dialogue with theologians to analyse the development and implications of 'Murdoch and the "Mystical Christ": a Dialogue with Christian Theology'. This chapter subtly explores the idea of the 'mystical Christ' as it appears in Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and in her novels *Henry and Cato*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, *The Good Apprentice*, *The Philosopher's Pupil*, *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Green Knight*. It investigates the roots of the idea in her thinking, which go far beyond the parallel she draws with the 'mystical Buddha', stemming from her interest in Buddhism from the early 1970s. Other influences are shown to be the cross of Christ at the heart of attentiveness to the world in Simone Weil, the existential Christ in the theology of Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich, the divine 'presence' in the philosophy of religion of Donald MacKinnon and the 'God in your own soul' in the mystic Meister Eckhart. Through close readings of the novels and her *Metaphysics*, Fiddes argues that central to the idea is Murdoch's conviction that people attempt to evade death of the self and the eventual death of the body through a religion of suffering, and that the Christ who 'did not cheat death' and yet who 'travels with us' is a presence that enables us both to face death and give attention to others.

In Chap. 3, 'Despite Herself: Iris Murdoch, the Reluctant Christian?', Frances White audaciously addresses two questions: first, concerning

critical disagreement with Murdoch about her self-perception; second, concerning what it is to be ‘Christian’. Murdoch disavowed the idea that she was a philosophical-novelist and put early critics off exploring that notion. Since her death, however, scholars have experienced a new-found freedom to challenge this disconnection and to analyse the fruitful interplay between Murdoch’s fiction and her philosophy. Murdoch also dissociated herself from Virginia Woolf and it was not until 2014 that Donna Lazenby’s monograph *A Mystical Philosophy* and White’s essay, ‘Despite Herself: the Resisted Influence of Virginia Woolf on Iris Murdoch’s Fiction’ (Luprecht 2014, 3–47), broke her interdiction on connecting their work. This chapter similarly challenges Murdoch’s veto on viewing her as Christian. The dictionary definition of ‘Christian’ offers ‘relating to or professing Christianity or its teachings’ and ‘a person who has received baptism or is a believer in Christianity’. Murdoch was both baptised and confirmed in the Church of England: however, she was clear that she did not ‘believe’ in Christianity which she subjects to rigorous criticism. Nonetheless her work patently engages with Christianity, she clings to the figure of Christ and adheres to the values of transcendence and mysticism. White contends that just as Murdoch may fairly be called a philosophical-novelist and seen as the inheritor of Woolf, she may also coherently and retrospectively be counted as Christian. Despite acknowledging that this would incur Murdoch’s wrath, White venturesomely argues the case here.

In Chap. 4, ‘Christian Readers in England and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch 1948-c.1982’, Peter Webster notes that the years immediately before and following Iris Murdoch’s death saw an upswing in interest in the theological aspects of her work, both in the fiction and the philosophy. But this chapter confines itself to an earlier period, and to reactions among those who were of the long generation, to which Murdoch belonged, who were largely formed before the discursive emptying of British culture of its Christian content in the 1960s. Murdoch—and the reactions of others to her—merits the attention of the religious historian as a member of a transitional generation; the interest of her work is at least as much in what of the conceptual apparatus of her childhood faith she endeavoured to retain, as in what she jettisoned. Murdoch worked in areas of philosophy that edged closely onto the field of theology: principally metaphysics and ethics, but also (more obliquely) aesthetics, which in Murdoch’s case provides a bridge between the other two. Webster treats these three areas separately from each other as the degree of Christian engagement with Murdoch, and the modes in which it occurred, were quite different in

each case. Though saying little new about Murdoch's works themselves, he sheds light on the prevailing intellectual conditions under which at least some of Murdoch's readers would have encountered her work. This chapter is both an essay in Murdoch reception history, and in the history of English theology and philosophy of religion in a period of disruption and change. It begins with an examination of the several reasons—of technology, institution and gender—why Murdoch's philosophical writing was difficult for professional theologians and philosophers of religion both to locate and to accept as part of the same theological exercise: one that implied certain institutional and methodological commitments, a sense of being in dialogue with a tradition. Yet her work did find Christian readers, who received it in different ways. Readers such as Harry Williams and Martin Jarrett-Kerr could find points of contact with Murdoch's understanding of the creative act. In ethics, her Christian contemporaries could recognise Murdoch as an ally in countering the assault from both existentialism and the analytic philosophy of her Oxford peers. However, though they were able to find techniques of practical use in her working out of that ethical project, there was at its heart what Basil Mitchell called 'the absence of the sort of metaphysical framework that might have given it substance'. Webster concludes that Christian readers travelled some of the way with Murdoch while all the while suspecting that the final leap to theism would bring her project to completion, if only she could make it. His meticulous historical research greatly augments our understanding of the ecclesiastical context in which Murdoch produced her idiosyncratic theological thinking.

The final aspect of Murdoch's relationship with Christianity investigated in the first part of *Iris Murdoch and the Western Theological Imagination* breaks new ground with fresh innovative research by Natasha Alden. In Chap. 5, "Quakerish lady"? Iris Murdoch and the Religious Society of Friends', Alden notes that Murdoch's metaphysics, and her complex, ambivalent yet sustained relationship with Christianity, have been the subject of much debate. In this chapter she expands the parameters of this debate by tracing the influence of the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers) on Murdoch's thinking about theism, about the good, and what it means to be good, and about the relationship of Christian belief to politics and morality. Alden admits that trying to unpick distinct denominational strands in Murdoch's thinking might be a fool's errand; her metaphysics is so distinctly her own as to have generated much debate and little agreement, chiefly encompassing aspects of Christian

thought from a variety of denominations, different aspects of Buddhist thought, and Platonism. Yet, as Alden rightly claims, it is unarguable that Murdoch had what Peter J. Conradi has described as ‘unfinished business’ with the Quakers, who despite being a relatively small church in the UK, feature in 10 of her 26 novels, and whose theology—the language of stillness and light, the centrality of decentring of the self in corporate worship, and the view of all of life as sacramental—chimes with Murdoch’s theology, especially in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Without wishing to identify Murdoch as a closet Quaker, Alden makes a case here for her as ‘Quakerish’, borrowing the word Murdoch used to describe her Quaker headmistress at Badminton School. This chapter explores Murdoch’s experience of the strongly Quaker ethos of Badminton for the first time, situating its head, a life-long influence on Murdoch, as one of the pioneers of 1930s Quaker education, and showing how Murdoch’s formative years were spent in a community which was part of a close-knit network of Quaker teachers, politicians and campaigners. Alden explores where, how and why Quakers appear in Murdoch’s fiction across her writing career, and how Murdoch’s early exposure to Quaker ideas and Quaker worship might have influenced her theology, culminating with the writing of *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (1983) and the 1982 Gifford lectures, later to become *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), in which the impact of Quaker thought on Murdoch’s thinking about modern Christianity, ethics and art is most apparent. Alden’s extensive researches in Badminton School Archive as well as the Iris Murdoch Collections in Kingston University Archives have borne much fruit in giving us far greater depth of knowledge of a profoundly shaping influence on Murdoch’s theological approach.

## PART II: INDIVIDUAL TEXTS, DIALOGUES AND PEOPLE

Part II, Individual Texts, Dialogues and People, spans a wide tract of time. It ranges over Murdoch’s connections with the ancient Book of Job, medieval theologians—in particular Anselm, Augustine and Abelard, the anchoress Dame Julian of Norwich, and Murdoch’s tutor and mentor, the twentieth-century theologian Donald MacKinnon. In Chap. 6 Daniel Read discusses the deep engagement of Murdoch’s writings with the Book of Job, the earliest and perhaps most austere Judeo-Christian response to the problem of evil. Its moral lessons—that Job must abjure his self-righteousness in favour of gratitude; that the moral individual must endure

their suffering with faith, patience and respect; that there are no magical solutions to suffering—are all echoed in Murdoch’s fiction, particularly the novels of the 1960s. Her first engagement with this text would, undoubtedly, have been through early readings of the Bible. In October 1964, however, Murdoch was invited to contribute to a discussion at Trinity College, Dublin on ‘Job: Prophet of Modern Nihilism’. Her preparations for, and reflections on, this event mark her letters, her journals, her fiction and her philosophy. At roughly the same time, she was also reading Carl Gustav Jung’s *Answer to Job* (1952), a text whose influence can be felt on her novels and philosophy alike. Murdoch’s dialogue with the Book of Job, as this chapter illustrates, is diverse and wide-ranging. She not only directly mentions the text in novels like *The Time of the Angels*, *Nuns and Soldiers* and *The Good Apprentice*, but also, on a deeper spiritual level, is prompted by it—and by other critical engagements with it—to question the sovereignty of goodness in the moral life and the ubiquity of evil and suffering in the world. Read’s detailed research richly opens up this previously under-remarked area of Murdoch’s deep engagement with an ancient text.

Chapter 7, ‘The Good Life: Iris Murdoch and Medieval Theology’ by Matthew Mills, initiatively brings Murdoch’s theological thinking into dialogue with the work of the medieval theologians, Anselm of Canterbury, Augustine of Hippo and Peter Abelard of Paris. Mills detects unexpected resonances between her writings and those of these Catholic luminaries, notwithstanding her atheistic outlook. He finds parallels between Murdoch and Abelard whose works show both these authors to be philosophical and spiritual seekers, subjecting the content of faith to the scrutiny of reason, and he presents them as two philosophical minds who are prepared to pose unconventional questions, challenge traditional ways of thinking, and follow the light of reason to their conclusions. Mills uncovers evidence from her library, held in the Iris Murdoch Collections, Kingston University Archives, of Murdoch’s familiarity with medieval theology and her serious consideration of its perspective. He does not claim her as a closet medievalist but this sustained critical reflection on her central philosophical idea of the Good suggests a constructive dialogue with insights from medieval theology with which it resonates. By her appeal to the language of medieval Christianity, Mills avers that Murdoch demonstrates its abiding power and that by attempting to transpose religious concepts such as grace into a secular context, she assents to their truth. His research

breaks new ground and his arguments are thought provoking and persuasive.

Anne Rowe, in Chap. 8, ‘God’s Spies: Iris Murdoch and Julian of Norwich’, narrows the medieval focus to one specific spiritual writer. She combines meticulous historical research with challenging new readings of Murdoch’s novels suggested by Dame Julian’s unique theological insights. Murdoch’s fascination with the life and work of the fourteenth-century Christian mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich, spanned four decades and has been noted in a number of studies on her theological thinking but not extensively explored in mainstream Murdoch criticism. With reference to biographical information on both women and analyses of incidences where Murdoch refers to Dame Julian in her journals and letters, Rowe unravels Murdoch’s persistent fascination with Julian. An overview of Dame Julian’s sixteen visions that comprise her *Revelations of Divine Love* forms the basis for comparisons between the ways each woman explored fundamental questions related to Christian belief: how human beings understand the idea of God; how they respond to the ubiquity of sin; how they make sense of human suffering and how the teachings of Christ could be understood in the context of day-to-day life. After exploring similarities and differences in the women’s personalities and beliefs and the various ways in which they hold interest for contemporary theologians, this chapter analyses characters and theological issues that explicitly reference Dame Julian in four of Murdoch’s novels: the postulant Catherine Fawley in *The Bell* (1958); the former nun, Anne Cavidge and the painter Tim Reede in *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980); the wife of a serial adulterer, Franca Sheerwater, in *The Message to the Planet* (1989) and Bradley Pearson, the ageing, failed writer who falls catastrophically in love with the young Julian Baffin in *The Black Prince* (1973). Rowe contends that these novels function as vehicles for often difficult moral, social and theological debates that can make for uncomfortable reading as Murdoch joins Dame Julian in challenging conventional thinking on the nature of sin, suffering and justice. Readers will be provoked into rethinking Murdoch’s stance by this contentious new reading of her fiction.

Chapter 9 brings the conversation in this collection forward to Murdoch’s own time, as Miles Leeson innovatively surveys ‘Murdoch’s MacKinnon: The Grounding of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*’. Since her centenary in 2019 interest has gathered pace in Murdoch’s final, and most comprehensive, work of philosophy—*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). Leeson observes that whilst significant attention has been

given to the central figures Murdoch engages with—Kant, Wittgenstein, Plato and many more besides—little has been said regarding a close reading of her intimate influences. This chapter examines in depth the textual relationship between Murdoch’s work and that of the theologian Donald MacKinnon. Murdoch was taught by MacKinnon, had a brief friendship with him, and carried his intellectual influence with her for the rest of her life. Leeson examines her marginalia in Murdoch’s copies of two of his major works, *The Borderlands of Theology* (1968) and *The Problems of Metaphysics* (1974), and considers the influence these books had on her own development via, first, her Gifford Lectures of 1982 and later, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Whilst the chapter does highlight biographical connections, its primary focus is close textual and paratextual analysis with a view to confirming the multitude of connecting points that have, thus far, remained hidden in the Iris Murdoch archives. By his interlinking of these two theologically minded philosophers, Leeson opens up new avenues for interpretations of Murdoch’s unique work.

### PART III: PUSHING OUT THE BOUNDARIES

Part III of this collection, Pushing Out the Boundaries, creatively extends the range of angles from which Murdoch’s theological imagination can be approached. Her 1977 study of Plato, *The Fire and the Sun*, is here examined as a religious rather than purely philosophical text; the concept of forgiveness in Murdoch’s worldview is foregrounded and interrogated; her previously under-remarked interest in, and narrative use of, the occult is given serious consideration, and finally, fiction and film are juxtaposed as Murdoch’s novel *The Bell* and Tarkovsky’s film *Andrei Rublev* cast light upon each other in their shared concern with the theology of icons, which were significant to Murdoch, both in her life and in her art.

In Chap. 10 Hannah Maria Altorf discusses “‘The Point at which Plato Starts Making Jokes’: *The Fire and the Sun* as Religious Text”. Her starting point is that *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* has perplexed scholars. It is not really an introduction to Plato, as it assumes thorough understanding of his dialogues. Art is clearly central to the argumentation and yet, as James Wood has argued, the work does not meet the expectations of an aesthetic. It does not, for instance, discuss what is and what is not art. Rather, it considers whether art and artists should be banned or welcomed. Above all, it holds that Plato’s objections to art are religious. Altorf asks, is it then a work about art and religion, or about

Plato's understanding of art and religion? But this question does not go far enough to explain the puzzling nature of the work. Instead, she contends that *The Fire and the Sun* is itself a religious work. Her argument is based on close reading of the text, both for Murdoch's understanding of religion and for the urgency with which it is discussed. In so doing, she opens up new areas of thought and takes our understanding of this somewhat overlooked text to a deeper level.

Chapter 11 by Scott H. Moore cogitatively contemplates 'Forgiveness and the "Beautiful, Unexpected Strangeness of the World" in Iris Murdoch'. This chapter surveys how the concept and practice of forgiveness is presented in Murdoch's work. Moore examines her use of forgiveness in both her fiction and in her philosophical writing. He finds that for Murdoch, forgiveness is a common and important theme and is primarily about personal well-being and not always about reconciliation with another. This secular (and self-focused) view of forgiveness brings it into tension with Murdoch's larger commitments to unselfing and to understanding love as 'knowledge of the individual.' Through a detailed analysis of characters' experience of forgiving and being forgiven in a well-chosen selection of Murdoch's novels from *The Nice and the Good* (1968) to *The Green Knight* (1993) Moore explores these tensions in an effort to offer a coherent view of Murdoch's understanding of this important practice. Yet in so doing he persuasively and troublingly shows that Murdoch's disavowal of what he calls the 'theological baggage' of forgiveness causes problems for her understanding and presentation of this central Christian concept. This strips it of the transformative power forgiveness potentially offers for renewing human lives and relationships, leaving us with a watered-down idea of letting go of the past. Moore thus discloses a lacuna in Murdoch's moral psychology, based perhaps in a failure of theological imagination—a challenge for philosophers and novel readers alike.

In Chap. 12 Rob Hardy inventively reflects on "'Seeing more than We Are Supposed To": Iris Murdoch and the Occult'. This chapter begins by showing that the word occult in its neutral sense (hidden) is central to Murdoch's philosophical thought. It reviews Murdoch's arguments in *Metaphysic as a Guide to Morals* with those thinkers (Wittgenstein, Derrida) committed to a description of human life as 'outsideless', a word invented by Don Cupitt, who has also attributed to Wittgenstein the view that 'there is no mystery. There is no hidden metaphysical world beyond the veil of sense', and that as for humans possessing an inner life, the idea is nonsense. Murdoch, on the contrary, argues for the existence of 'our own

private thought-being, that inner which is so different from our lived outer [...] We know very little even about the people who are closest to us. We depend upon intuition and rightly accept many things as mysteries'. Hardy contends that on words like these ('mysteries', 'private', 'inner') Murdoch's novels are also built. In them she presents human beings committed to exploring what is hidden from them (as well as those failing to explore: in both cases Freud and Jung are magisterial background presences). At times her explorers use 'occult' (evil magic) as in *The Nice and the Good*, but at others they are awarded, like Tim Reade in *Nuns and Soldiers*, a secret sight of the 'perpetual occult donation' given by the earth to those of her children who deserve it. There are other examples of benign 'occult donations' in Murdoch's fiction, sometimes but not always associated with the paranormal; Murdoch also simply presents characters committing an innocent act which also seems to represent their search for the occult as a benign donation. This chapter locates and celebrates these acts and demonstrates how they amplify Murdoch's view of people in their relation to their mother earth, to each other, and to themselves. Hardy usefully challenges readers to look again at these often perplexing elements in Murdoch's novels and to widen their own perspectives.

The final offering from Andrew Taylor in Chap. 13, perhaps surprisingly, studies 'Dispersal and Gathering in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*'. The final scenes of Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* are concerned with the casting of a new bell for a cathedral, under the supervision of a young boy, Boriska. A delegation from the local prince has arrived searching for his father, an expert bellfounder, with a commission for the work, only to be informed by Boriska that his father is dead but, before he died, had passed on to his son the secrets of his art. Against their better judgment, the delegation is persuaded by Boriska that he is more than capable of the work. The remainder of this extended scene is then concerned with the founding of the bell. Rublev has arrived on the scene and experiences what happens here as a renewal of his faith, after a long period of despair in which he has ceased to paint icons. The eventual successful casting and first ringing of the bell contrasts ironically with the boy's confession to Rublev that no secrets of bell founding were passed on to him by his father and that the success of the project amazed him as much as anyone else. The work on the bell has, nevertheless, *created* community. This creation of community is to be contrasted with Dora Greenfield's *disordered* desire to resurrect the old abbey bell from the lake

and to substitute it for the new one about to be commissioned for the abbey church in Iris Murdoch's novel, *The Bell*. The raising of the bell marks the *dispersal* of the lay community at Imber Court, although, as with Rublev before her, it also provides Dora with a renewed and proper sense of what her life might be from now onwards. Within this reflection on ordered and disordered community is a consideration of the place and theology of icons in creating a proper understanding of community, and which feature at several points in Murdoch's own work, including Rublev's own on The Trinity (also known as The Hospitality of Abraham) in *The Time of the Angels*. By reading Murdoch's novel through the lens of a film, Taylor disrupts the usual boundaries of literary critical thinking. In this he follows and augments the work of Lucy Bolton on Murdoch and film.

In 1984—when she was writing *The Good Apprentice* and arduously working her Gifford lectures up into publishable book form—Iris Murdoch told Peter Conradi, 'Everything I have ever written has been concerned with holiness'.<sup>2</sup> In a manner perhaps inherited from her Quaker-influenced schooldays, as Alden suggests, Murdoch blurs distinctions between sacred and secular, marvelling at all that is, and paying attention to it. Small wonder that religious traces are to be discerned throughout her writings, both philosophical and fictional. Yet Murdoch's unorthodox neo-theology and unstable religious stance continue to be experienced by readers as slippery: she cannot be pinned down as either a person or a writer. This elusiveness may account for quiet notes of frustration detectable in the chapters by White and Webster, perhaps even Fiddes. But the positive aspect of this Protean quality in Murdoch's theological imagination may be that it holds a space open for new connections, such as those offered here by Hardy and Taylor. And the central core of her religious sensibility keeps her work connected to historical aspects of theology—evidenced by Mills and Rowe, to her own age—as Leeson makes plain, and to religious texts and concepts—demonstrated by Read and Moore. Her religious sense tinges all her philosophy—sometimes confusingly as Altorf indicates. What makes Murdoch most fascinating is her refusal to separate these strands of thought in her work; theology is a part of life with a web of connections to all her other interests. As Fiddes has noted elsewhere 'Murdoch appears to be one who stands at the intersection of genres, or to be continually crossing their boundaries'.<sup>3</sup> Taken altogether, this collection in the 'Iris Murdoch Today' series both consolidates earlier discussion of the vital part theology plays in Murdoch's thought and also enlarges it as a wide range of current Murdoch scholars from diverse disciplines develop debate

Eliot, T.S., 52, 189  
 England, Frank, 2  
 Evans, Mary, 101

**F**

Farrer, Austin, 68, 72, 75, 83  
 Fiddes, Paul S., v, 2, 3, 12, 26, 32, 42,  
 44, 84n1, 104, 117, 124, 125,  
 138, 153, 184, 191, 206, 273  
 Fletcher, Joseph F., 80  
 Foot, Philippa, 46, 52, 73, 139, 143,  
 183, 185, 187, 199, 214n6  
 Fraenkel, Eduard, 120–124, 133,  
 134n9, 185  
 Freud, Sigmund, 11, 51, 241–247  
 Frost, J. William, 95

**G**

Gainsborough, Thomas, 264, 275  
 Gallagher, Kenneth T., 152  
 Gandhi, Indira, 58  
 Gandhi, Mahatma, 106  
 Glover, Stephen, 49  
 Goebbels, Joseph, 196  
 Gowans, Christopher, 34–36  
 Graham, John W., 92, 93  
 Green, Arthur, 106, 109  
 Greene, Graham, 137  
 Grimshaw, Tammy, 2  
 Grubb, Edward, 93  
 Gunton, Colin, 73, 80, 81, 83  
 Gustafson, James, 69

**H**

Hacking, I., 206  
 Haffenden, John, 49  
 Hämäläinen, Nora, 183, 206–208,  
 210–213, 214n3  
 Hamilton, Andy, 214n4  
 Hampshire, Stuart, 184, 201n3

Hardy, Robert, 2, 10–12, 161  
 Harris, H. Lyn, 95  
 Harris, J. Rendell, 95  
 Harvey, M.P.T. Edmund, 102  
 Hauerwas, Stanley, 215n11  
 Hawkins, Peter S., 42, 63, 67, 104  
 Headlam, Walter, 121  
 Hederman, Mark Patrick, 2,  
 248, 251–253  
 Hegel, G.W.F., 70, 189–191, 200  
 Hepburn, Robert W., 69  
 Heraclitus, 129, 134n11  
 Herbert, George, 58  
 Heusel, Barbara Stevens, 41  
 Hick, John, 52, 71  
 Hicks, David, 186  
 Hitler, Adolf, 196  
 Hoar, Vera, 185  
 Hobbes, Thomas, 119, 120  
 Hobson, Harold, 48  
 Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 58  
 Hopwood, Mark, 2, 206  
 Horner, Avril, 50–52, 119,  
 123, 160, 162, 186, 197,  
 199, 240  
 Hoyland, Geoffrey, 103  
 Husserl, Edmund, 35  
 Hussey, Walter, 74

**I**

Innes, George, 102

**J**

Jarrett-Kerr, Martin, 5, 77, 82, 83  
 Job, the Book of, 6, 7, 117–133,  
 192, 193  
 Jones, Rufus, 93, 95, 105  
 Julian of Norwich, 6, 8, 63, 137,  
 154–155, 159–179  
 Jung, Carl Gustav, 7, 11, 118, 122, 128,  
 129, 134n11, 241–247, 249–251

## K

Kafka, Franz, 123  
 Kant, Immanuel, 9, 44, 117, 140,  
 189, 191, 192, 197, 198, 200,  
 201n5, 211, 212, 271, 275  
 Kapleau, Philip, 38n9  
 Kastrup, Bernardo, 252, 254n11  
 Kelly, Thomas R., 95  
 Kennedy, Thomas C., 93, 94  
 Kerr, Fergus, 1, 81, 84n2  
 Kierkegaard, Søren, 53, 189, 211, 212  
 Klastchko, Lucy (Sister Marian), 46,  
 52, 159–162, 171  
 Koestler, Arthur, 193  
 Kripal, Jeffrey J., 252, 254n11  
 Kristeva, Julia, 138

## L

Lansdowne, Martha, 95, 110n4  
 Laverty, Megan, 183, 190, 199, 200  
 Lawrence, D.H., 243  
 Lazenby, Donna J., 2, 4, 42  
 Le Fanu, Mark, 258  
 Leech, Ann, 50  
 Leeson, Miles, 8, 9, 12, 42, 46, 48,  
 70, 121, 198, 209  
 Lello, Ronald S., 20  
 Lenin, Vladimir, 98, 106, 258  
 Lindbäck, Lyra Ekström, 42  
 Lipscomb, Benjamin J.B., 215n6  
 Lorenz, James, 262, 263  
 Lucas, J.R., 70  
 Luprecht, Mark, 4

## M

Mac Cumhaill, Clare, 184  
 MacIntyre, Alasdair, 68, 82, 83  
 MacKinnon, Donald, 3, 6, 9, 32, 33,  
 45, 52, 57, 72, 83, 120–122,  
 129–131, 133, 184–200, 201n5,  
 209, 215n10

Maimonides, 58, 119  
 Maltby, Judith, 2  
 Marcel, Gabriel, 53, 138, 152, 155n4  
 March, Denis, 50  
 Martin, Priscilla, 207, 243  
 Marxism, 49  
 Mascall, Eric, 68, 70, 72, 75  
 Mauriac, François, 57  
 McCord Adams, Marilyn, 143  
 McGilchrist, Iain, 265  
 McMahan, David, 37  
 Medcalf, Stephen, 263  
 Merritt, Melissa, 191, 212  
 Meszaros, Julia T., 2, 79  
 Midgley, Mary, 46, 137, 139, 155n3,  
 183–185, 201n5, 214n6  
 Mill, J.S., 193  
 Miller, Jonathan, 13n1, 49, 50, 92, 94  
 Milligan, Edward H., 93  
 Mills, Matthew, 7, 12  
 Mitchell, Basil, 5, 70, 71, 73,  
 80, 82–84  
 Mitchell, Edgar, 252  
 Monk, Ray, 194  
 Moore, Scott H., 2, 10, 12, 124  
 Morgan, David, 123  
 Mulhall, Stephen, 2  
 Murdoch, Iris, v, 1–13, 13n1, 17–37,  
 67–84, 89–109, 117–133,  
 137–155, 159–179, 183,  
 205–214, 214n2, 214n6,  
 215n10, 215n13,  
 219–253, 257–276  
*Acostas: Platonic Dialogues*, 132  
*An Accidental Man*, 106, 223–225  
*The Bell*, 8, 9, 11, 12, 43, 44, 70,  
 78, 164, 165, 167, 181n13,  
 224, 236, 237, 257–276  
*The Black Prince*, 8, 156n6, 164,  
 176–178, 215n7, 220, 223,  
 225, 232  
*Book and the Brotherhood*, 3, 20, 58,  
 223, 232, 244