

Progressive Voices



Dec 2023, PV47

A fresh path to travel?

**I have been weaned from the breast-milk of theology,
fed to all church members by a dominant priesthood;
escaped the persuasive expertise of Alpha courses,
with their eager, earnest, graduates.**

**I have travelled the fresh pathways of thoughtful internet gurus,
exposing more analytical views of religious legend,
more honest approaches to scriptural stories;
maybe starting from a less doctrinal base.**

**I have questioned their conclusions, struggled with their ideas
and often faced the need to make my own decisions,
based on the evidence that they supply,
but unbounded by religious dogma.**

**I have thus come to wonder whether religions
are truly a path to goodness or to slavery;
for all are primarily concerned with power;
Power to promulgate their own views;
Power over a captive congregation;
Dominant power over others.**

**We may well then ask ourselves, and maybe others,
whether God, divinity, and its support package
was created to control or to console;
whether the format of religion
is inherently good or evil.**

**In asking that question we may come to see
that divinity is not external to our being,
but lies as a guiding hand within us.
Religions exploit that reality
for their own benefit.**

**So I am tied to a church with beliefs opposed to my own,
but holding the key to fellowship with those travelling
a different, if somehow related, journey.**

**For the cost of complete freedom
from the bonds of apparent religious adherence
exceeds my moral and spiritual budget.**

Edward Conder

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Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions, are all welcome. Publication is at the editor's discretion: dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

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Welcome

A picture is worth a thousand words, and sometimes it can allow space for reflection without starting an argument. Hopefully our cover of a Christmas tree in Bethlehem's Manger Square will achieve that.

Alongside our usual mix of news, poetry, reflections and letters we take two different looks at Jesus, explore Near Death Experiences, are challenged to think the unthinkable, consider Artificial Intelligence, a dash of metaphysics, church buildings and why we really go into them.

Welcome to the 47th edition of PV.

Enjoy!

Dave Coaker



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Chair's Letter

John Keats' 'Ode to Autumn' celebrated the season's "mists and mellow fruitfulness". There may have been a bit of mellow fruitfulness at some point, but this year the mists seem to have given way to heavy downpours – at least where I live, they have. This weather led me to an interesting encounter early one morning.

I go running twice a week, and for much of the year this happens, at least partly, in the dark. In order that I can see what I'm running on I wear a head torch, and in order that others can see me, I wear a fluorescent yellow jacket. Part of my regular run takes me around the edge of a large field, and as I approached it in the darkness of one early morning in October, I met a man who shouldn't have been there. He was holding a bike and looking confused. "Do you know how to get to..." he paused and pointed to an address on his phone screen, "it's my first day there, and I'm already late." His strong accent suggested he was not only new to the job, but possibly also new to the country, I wondered how I would feel if I was in a strange country, lost, at the edge of a muddy field.

"You're going to need to go over there," I said, pointing roughly south, "but you'll need to go around the field." "I went up there," he said, "but there was a forest, and I was frightened." I looked at him, a big guy, more than six foot tall, and strongly built. "There's nothing to be frightened off in that forest," I said, adding, "I'm going up that way, I will show you the way if you want."

We set off, and soon came to large puddles in the path, I tried to hop around them, he had to find a way of cycling through them without getting his work clothes soaked. Eventually we reached the top of the field, and I indicated a path – "Go down there." He thanked me and began to pedal off, "Cheers," I called out. "You're welcome!" came the reply.

'You're welcome...' I thought about those words as I trotted off, thinking about who had helped whom. I was reminded of the verse about 'entertaining angels unawares' and wondered who, in this instance, might have entertained an angel. The brightly lit jogger, or the scared cyclist.

Sometimes very different people want to go in the same direction. Sometimes unspoken assumptions, or vocalised fears, can prevent us from finding our way together. Sometimes the most unlikely fellow travellers show up, it's up to us to find a way to tell them they are welcome.

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Buildings

Why are congregations in all churches falling so noticeably? Part of the reason chimes with the beginning of the Industrial Mission movement, which was due to the Bishop of Sheffield noticing that following World War Two, congregations in the city were smaller than they had been. Apparently, he sent some clergy into local factories to try to find out why this was happening, and the result was his commissioning some chaplains in local industry. That's the story I inherited when I became a joined Black Country Urban Industrial Mission team.

But there is another reason, and that is to do with the message of the Church, and the language both verbal and visible, in which it is contained – or perhaps constrained. Ever since Constantine coerced church leaders at the 325CE Council of Nicaea to elevate Christianity to be the preferred religion for the Empire, Christianity has been a system of belief rather than a way of life. The Church expects its members to believe the unbelievable that tries to express the inexpressible. Small wonder that the Church is not increasing its membership, except in those churches that don't expect their members to think for themselves.

The reason the Church is losing members, however, is not just its ancient rituals and traditions. The real reason is its buildings, those majestic shrines that bear silent witness to past ages when most people did in fact attend church more or less regularly. In today's world of myriad choices, the church building is where you "do religion." Yes, of course the church building is where you can fulfil the rituals of life – baptism, marriage and burial – but why else would you go? The majority of folk have little or no experience of belonging to a Christian faith community, and it is most unlikely that they would be attracted to a Sunday service out of curiosity.

Matthew's gospel ends with the Great Commission, with Jesus standing on the mountain. It's the inevitable climax to his presentation of Jesus as the new Moses. "Go and make disciples" is the message. So, we have to do the Moses thing – help people come to terms with the mess the world is in, and in our own way, live as those whose lives have been touched by the divine, given a glimpse of a world in which there will be justice and peace. Being a Christian is not about believing but about being – what Marcus Borg called believing. Being filled with love and compassion, with a sense of community and genuine acceptance of others.

By all means go to church on Sunday. Enjoy the worship and hope to come away with something to think about. But don't expect to see strangers and inquisitive newcomers. After all, the mission of the Church begins as you leave the church building.

Robin Blount

Letters

Bible Notes

I've been a member of PCN for a while and membership has helped me both in my Christian journey and as a Methodist Local Preacher.

I simply cannot preach things that I don't believe in, nor sing about them! Now, here's the rub. I believe I need to keep up my daily Bible readings, and have tried a variety of sources and none suits! I've read Spong, Borg, Crossan and their writings help me gather my thoughts when preparing worship but I rather wished they had written something more akin to 'Bible Study Notes'!

Have you any suggestions please? Or perhaps you might consider this plea as suitable for inclusion in your next edition of 'Progressive Voices', please, in order to throw it out to a wider audience. Many thanks.

Paul Wilks

Thank you!

First I want to say a big thank you to all of you at PCN. As I get older (I shall be 90 in December!) more of my friends and acquaintances are either dead or limited in their ability to leave their room or hold a conversation. I am very fortunate to wake up each morning and my brain still works, but it is getting rather lonely. This is why the PCN magazine and the newsletters are so important to me. It helps, more than you might think, to still be connected to others who have a 'progressive' understanding of the life and teaching of Jesus.

David Kemp

Encouragement

Thanks for including part of my 'fifth gospel' in the most recent edition of Progressive Voices. I had some nice comments about it last night at the Galilee Course from people who had read it, which was very encouraging.

Robin Drummond

The Hampshire Hub

Thanks to Martin Godfrey

In 2004 the Sea of Faith organised a conference in Southampton entitled 'Beyond Belief: New Thinking about the Big Questions'. The speakers included Don Cupitt and David Boulton. The flyer said 'It is hoped that it would provide the impetus to start a Hampshire and/or IOW SoF Group.'

Martin Godfrey had recently founded PCN Solent, meeting in Southampton. At the conference it was Martin who invited people to meet – out of which grew the 'Hampshire Hub'.

At the beginning of many editions of 'Hampshire Hub News' Martin wrote: 'The Hampshire Hub links people in and around Hampshire who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from an open, non-dogmatic standpoint. It provides news of local, regional and national events, open to all, that may be of interest to those on the circulation list. It also facilitates local groups.' Over the years, Hampshire Hub News was distributed to hundreds of people.

The groups usually met monthly, often in one another's homes. Some affiliated to PCN, some to the Sea of Faith Network, and some were independent. Martin organised some of them and supported them all in one way or another.

Groups have come and gone, of course. In 2020, pre-Covid, there were 5 groups: the Alton Group, the A27 Book Club, the Southsea Group, and groups meeting in Lymington and Southampton. During Covid a few members met on Zoom. But by 2023 there are only two groups, meeting in Portsmouth and Southampton. We are small in number but we very much value our time together. Martin is still a member of the Southampton Group but has recently relinquished the Hub Convenorship.



Some of us have been members of these two groups from the beginning. All have been members for some years. We are sad that our numbers have declined, but we wish to thank Martin for all he has done to create and sustain the Hampshire Hub over 19 years.

Here are some of our testimonies to Martin:

- Martin is a force of nature: self-deprecating, a hard worker, and passionate about his advanced views on rationality in religion.
- How pleased I was to join PCN at when I did. It was very special to listen to his inspirational thoughts and reflections as they mirrored the ethos around Sea of Faith and PCN. It made me think I had found what I had been looking for.
- I have always thought of Martin as a very good listener, respectful of other people's views. He is not one to push his views on to others but is always happy to express his well-considered ideas. An excellent example of PCN ideals.

Carole Wynn

MEMBERSHIP

PCN Britain has charitable status, and we depend wholly on members for funding. Membership is for all who value an open, progressive and theologically radical voice, and want to maintain and promote that generous understanding of faith.

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The Jesus Story Re-imagined

Imagine for a moment that Christianity never happened. It's pretty difficult, given its enormous influence on both western and global culture, as Tom Holland's book 'Dominion' has explored in great detail. But suppose Paul was never converted on the road to Damascus. He and other pious Jews carried on where he'd left off with the stoning of Stephen and continued to persecute, with considerable success, those who claimed that a man called Jeshua from Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah.

So no missionary journeys; no letters to the young churches and, not long afterwards, the apparent disappearance of the tiny Jeshua party within Judaism after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in (what we call) AD 70. Only a few fragmentary references to this group in Josephus and other Jewish histories remain. The Romans didn't even notice that it had been and gone; they were all just 'Jews' to them.

Emperor Constantine lost the battle at Milvian Bridge with no miraculous sign the night before. No Councils, popes, crusades or Holy Roman Emperors ever existed. There was no conquest by Christian Europe of Latin America and beyond. Maybe the Jewish faith would have spread more widely given that its scriptures were available in Greek by then, (the Septuagint, also used by the New Testament writers). Maybe in this obscure corner of the Empire we'd still be worshipping Zeus or Woden. Perhaps 'civilisation' would never have developed; or maybe it would, but with a different driver and in a different direction as Islam might have provided the context instead.

Then, just a few years ago, a couple of lads messing around in caves somewhere in Syria, came across some ancient jars, one of which contained a rolled-up 'Jeshua scroll', perfectly preserved in the dry desert heat. There had always been rumours that the community didn't entirely die out and may even have had followers beyond Palestine, but



Ben Whitney was briefly a Baptist minister and is now a retired education social worker. www.ben-whitney.org.uk

there had never been any evidence of it before. Perhaps the scroll was hidden by a lone traveller or kept safe in a wider crisis like a drought or famine and never recovered. Or maybe the persecution hadn't gone away and secrecy was essential, or the group just died out here too.

The scholars conclude that this manuscript, also in Greek, is genuine; authentic to about the same period as the destruction of the Temple. It seems to be a 'first edition' of the Jesus story, though it ends abruptly and ambiguously, so maybe some of it is missing. A few women, (whose testimony didn't really count at the time), claimed to have 'met' the central figure again after his death, but the men who had known him are said to be sceptical. Rather realistically, the text concludes with a sense of fear, not of confident assertion. It is given a technical name of letters and numbers, but most people know it as 'Mark', named in tribute to the professor of ancient history from Eostre University College Wulfrunhampton who first brought it to public attention.

This newly-found 'scripture' about a man called Iesous would not be exactly like the one we have now, to which later tradition has given the same author's name. Although it is widely agreed that Mark's gospel is the earliest of the four, all of them were written after Paul, who seems to have known little about Jesus' ministry and teaching. They may well reflect earlier, probably orally-preserved memories, but even Mark is not straight biography.

The Jesus community had come to believe certain things about him by then and, given that our texts are written in a language he did not speak and come from the wider Mediterranean world, not from where he actually lived, there must be some later Pauline nuances and influences in the light of their circumstances at the time. But these can often be spotted and the gospel tradition does seem to be concerned to fill in the gaps about his life, even if it was largely ignored by the later emphasis on 'born of the virgin Mary' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' with nothing in-between.

The new manuscript, free of these influences because they never happened, initially triggers a widespread interest in this real person Jeshua, (his Hebrew/Aramaic name), now at least reasonably attested as having actually existed. There is talk of a religious revival as a result. Some of course



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dismiss it as a work of fiction or a fake, but many are attracted by what they now read of this human person and the things he was remembered as saying and doing. Much of the story chimes in with the generally-held view that in the battle between goodness and its opposite we would rather live in a world where a shared humanity wins out in the end. Bad things often happen to good people and always have done, so it rings true, especially among those whose lives are a struggle.

A community of 'Jeshuans' has begun to emerge, meeting together to read the stories and, especially to reflect on the part that says he was killed, apparently unjustly, mostly because of his compassion and care for the excluded. His death is interpreted as a self-sacrifice for love's sake and for some, especially women, it feels like he is 'alive' in them when they try to live in his remembered way. Some see the last meal he shared with his friends as particularly important and have started to act it out, which is creating some tension with the surviving Jewish religion, as it did originally.

Of course, the priests of whatever religion we have instead at the time don't welcome the competition. Most politicians find its claims subversive and potentially revolutionary as Pilate did. Some countries seek to ban the Jeshuans altogether or lock them up. A few might even have them executed as an example. For some the lifestyle and implications prove too difficult and, to be fair, some of those who take it all too literally come across as a bit naive or threatening with their talk of the 'end times'. That's going a bit too far. They were wrong then and they're wrong now, say many. Life goes on as before. In the end most people decide it would never work and it probably won't last long. Saturnalia in late December gets most of us through the winter and there's always the summer solstice to look forward to.

So, back in the real world, what might it mean to be a follower of Jesus if the gospel of Mark was all that we had? Might that actually be enough without all the later credal additions and developments? Denis Nineham in his classic, and still the best, commentary from 1963, (that year again), writes that Mark's concern was not to convince his readers that Jesus was the Messiah (they believed that already) but to demonstrate that the Messiah was always going to be very different from what was generally expected. The clues are all there in the Jewish scriptures and are reinforced in Jesus' parables. The nature of his death makes it evident, so the passion narrative is central. But this is not just the life and death of a good man.

Jesus is 'the Man' (a better translation according to Nineham than 'Son of Man') but he is also called 'Son of God', though Mark has no knowledge of a miraculous conception. This status seems to come from his baptism; the acceptance of his mission

which makes him more than just a teacher or prophet. He reveals the 'God-ness' in the world, but there is no claim of future atonement by his death or his own inherent Divinity.

This Jeshua should still strike us as a rather uncomfortable figure in our modern context. This is always going to make it difficult to be authentic in his 'Way'. There is an undercurrent of extremism and challenge that takes us well beyond 'gentle Jesus meek and mild'. I suspect that Jesus the man can prove just as difficult for us to relate to as some of us find the 'Christ' or Trinitarian figure of Christian orthodoxy to be. Those who threaten the status quo are rarely popular and, let's face it, we have such a comfortable life in so many ways. Only an anodyne Jesus, concerned only with my eternal salvation, or one safely confined to a conventional religion that just asks to be left alone, seems to tick many people's boxes, as it always has done.

But, given that we do not know exactly what it was like to be there at the time, and Mark's pre-Christian 'first edition' still eludes us, I would rather be confused than confident; uncertain than strident. There is no playing down Jesus' essential Jewishness which perhaps puts all of the rest of us out on a limb. There is a potential internal conflict here between what I would like to be true as a liberal humanitarian and a religious tradition that often strikes me as exclusive and controlling.

I don't really know where the 'real' Jeshua of Nazareth would have stood in that debate. But in the end, giving up your life for the sake of others seems a meaningful metaphor worth remembering. Perhaps 'Christianity', however we define it, has had its day. It wasn't there at the beginning and it we don't need it now. But is some other focus possible? Maybe we need an entirely new language, avoiding 'religious' ideas altogether. I'm really not sure but the journey goes on. The end of the story is still missing.



Christianity and Jesus of Nazareth

In considering how far Christianity may have diverged from the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, the sources are few, bereft of original manuscripts and with ample evidence of editorial amendments. Initially there were many gospels, but most have not survived except in fragmentary form. A hypothesised document referred to as Q (German Quelle = source) is perceived to have influenced Matthew and Luke, and there is the Gospel of Thomas, the sayings of the Teacher, full of profundities. Otherwise, we are left with the NT gospels, written decades after the crucifixion by unlikely eyewitnesses of the events they describe, and who appear more interested in addressing their contemporary situations than in writing history. The wisdom of hindsight is in frequent evidence.

Besides an inclination to depict abstractions in concrete images, the evangelists often wrote with implied allusions to Jewish history. Readily understood by Jewish readers, the subtlety was lost on the growing number of Gentile followers. Reading the gospels as literal reportage is said to be the great Gentile heresy.

Matthew's birth stories provide an example. His genealogy of Jesus asserts the Davidic descent of Jesus as the son of Joseph, yet in the next breath we are told that Jesus was not Joseph's son! Matthew, evidently fluent in the Greek language and probably a scribe, was far too astute to make an unintended contradiction. His business was to proclaim Jesus as Messiah rather than to record history. This he did by a series of stories purporting to show Jesus as greater than Moses, the ultimate legend of Jewish history.

Jesus called himself 'the Son of Man' firmly rejecting anything more (Matthew 19:17). In the hands of Paul this appellation grows to Son of God, ostensibly designated by God after the death of Jesus for his faithfulness. Mark moves the designation to the baptism of Jesus, and Matthew to his birth. Finally, John has Jesus present 'in the beginning'. Similarly in language *Mashiah* (Messiah or anointed one) is translated as *Christos* in Greek and Christ in English, moving with unseemly haste from human to divine.

There can be little doubt that the first disciples were astonished that the spirit of Jesus remained with them after his death. They could only call the experience 'resurrection'. Conventional belief was that the departed went to *Sheol*, a shadowy place akin to Purgatory, where the dead in some discomfort awaited judgement at the last day (John 11:24). However, Christianity has turned the sense of the abiding spirit of Jesus into the more generalised Holy Spirit, moving the emphasis away from the Jesus of history.



David Stevenson is a restless Methodist. Worked in banking after a Modern Languages degree, self-employment and as his wife's carer.

Turning to Mark, the earliest surviving gospel to be written, he discounting the preceding years of Jesus' life and begins with his baptism. After this strongly affirmative moment Jesus withdraws into a wilderness experience in search of his calling. He displays exceptional control of the insidious demands of the ego, leading Dietrich Bonhoeffer to describe him as 'The man for others'. His mission would be to 'the lost sheep of the House of Israel', leaving little time for the righteous and even less for religious professionals. See the scathing parable in which a Samaritan is depicted as an improbable hero, the priest and Levite being too preoccupied with their duties to help a wounded man.

Mark tells us that Jesus healed the sick and taught in parables, but it is left to Matthew and Luke to provide details, perhaps with recourse to Q. Jesus is seen as a man living at the highest levels of consciousness, transcending his time and culture. He recognises the limitations of the scribes and Pharisees and evades the traps they set to ensnare him. He possessed a positive view of the human spirit, enabling people to change and grow, not through criticism but by love and acceptance.

Specifically, he was relaxed about the religious laws (Mark 2:27, John 8:7), but a keynote of his ministry is forgiveness. Motivation is shown in the parable of the unforgiving servant. Jesus' vision of a bountiful God readily accepting the shortcomings of his sons is movingly portrayed in the parable of the prodigal. The younger son's offer to renounce his status is summarily brushed aside.

And then there is the much quoted 'seventy times seven' injunction to Peter. If unlimited forgiveness is to be our aim, can anything less be expected of God? Jesus is content to rely upon the grace of his prodigal Father. Divine forgiveness is not dependant on sacrifice. Hence Jesus did not forgive sins as his critics assumed but declared them forgiven by God. News of the immanent Kingdom of Heaven was too important to be confined to rural Galilee. Much to their consternation Jesus boldly led his disciples to Jerusalem at the turbulent time of festival. His impact was dramatic, entering the city in symbolic fashion before robustly cleansing the Temple forecourt of moneychangers and traders. The people were exuberant. For them, if not for Jesus, messianic expectations meant liberation from Roman oppression.

Jesus was immediately perceived as a threat by both the religious and civic authorities. Herbert McCabe O.P. comments that Jesus didn't seem to have been interested in power but the powerful were very interested in him. Gethsemane soon followed, where Jesus with incredible courage resolved after agonising in prayer to remain true to his evolving mission rather than retreat to the comparative safety of Galilee.

It appears that Jesus was expecting the imminent end of the world, perhaps coinciding with his death. Long-term planning had no obvious place in his thinking. According to Acts the belief was shared for a time by his early followers. Mindful no doubt of the cry of dereliction, Albert Schweitzer concluded that Jesus died a despairing apocalyptic.

A reality check suggests that, after the horror of crucifixion, the broken body of Jesus as a convicted criminal would have been unceremoniously dumped into a common pit with the remains of other hapless victims. Was this gruesome fate more than his early followers could contemplate and certainly not a fitting end for a messiah? And was it too convenient that a wealthy secret follower, who had some credence with the Roman governor and possessed a nearby vacant sepulchre, should suddenly appear and fade away with equal rapidity afterwards? At all events Joseph of Arimathea served several purposes. He provided a more dignified end for Jesus, complied with prophetic expectations, and after the surprisingly quick demise of the crucified one, allowed the relatively intact body to be portrayed (contrary to the teaching of Jesus) as the sacrificial lamb of Yom Kippur, slain to bear the sins of the world. Saviour and Redeemer are not interchangeable words!

Legends invariably gather around the heads of heroes, especially those who die young. Jesus was no exception. Following his death and resurrection improbable myths arose. Fantasy and speculation should not be mistaken for mystery. Yet underlying it all is the evidence of the transformative experiences of his disciples and Saul of Tarsus. Why though do we insist, with the Pharisees, that resurrection must mean bodily resuscitation when we know full well that physicality is prone to change and decay but spirit is undying?

It seems that the innovative genius of Jesus, often misunderstood by his disciples, did not long survive his death. In his physical absence followers soon resorted to traditional beliefs. Pharisees had been the implacable critics of Jesus. With supreme irony his life fell to be interpreted by Paul, a Pharisee who had never known Jesus and had only limited contact with the first disciples, with whom he was at a clear disadvantage. He consequently decided that the life of Jesus no longer mattered! (2 Corinthians 5:16) Unsurprisingly Paul is seen as the true author of Christianity.



We are much indebted to Paul, but in sharp distinction from the teaching and practice of Jesus, Paul perceived his death as atonement. That view of Jesus essentially relied on revelation. We now understand that revelation is perforce received through the filter of the recipient's consciousness. The undistorted still small voice is never heard.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church describes Paul as 'the creator of the whole doctrinal and ecclesiastical system presupposed in his Epistles'. Eminent Jewish scholar and sometime Catholic priest Geza Vermes makes the case that Christianity is excessively influenced by both Paul and the mystical John, whom he characterises as the odd ones out among the apostles and evangelists respectively. Meanwhile religious historian Wilhelm Nestlé asserts that Paul replaced the gospel of Jesus with a gospel about Jesus. All agree that the life and teaching of Jesus as seen in the three Synoptic Gospels have been much underplayed by Christianity.

This prompts a fundamental question: Whose disciples are we? Whose indeed! Paul asks much the same question (1 Cor. 1:13) but fails to recognise the personal input in his schema.

History cannot be rewritten but we should learn from its mistakes. We shall do well to pay more attention to the Synoptic Gospels than to Paul and John. The call of Jesus is to be as salt in the Earth and yeast in the dough of the world. Like the sower going forth to sow, these are images of gently pervasive outreach. Jesus scandalised the respectable by socialising with and befriending the irreligious.

Last word to Michael Goulder's poem Exceedingly Odd, meditating on the women named in Matthew in the lineage of Christ, the poem ends thus:

*That the moral may wait at the Heavenly Gate,
While sinners and publicans go in before,
Who have not earned their place,
but received it by grace,
And have found them a righteousness,
not of the law.*

It's very Jesus (Matt 21:31) pricking our pretensions exquisitely.

Near-Death Experiences

A few years ago, I decided to delve into Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). Like many people, I'd heard of NDEs, and also Out-of-Body Experiences (OBEs), but knew next to nothing about them. What astounded me, when I started to read the literature, is the amount of research that has been undertaken and the volume of data and evidence that has been collated over the past fifty years. This started with the publication, in 1975, of psychologist Raymond Moody's book *Life after Life* in which he reported on the NDEs of 150 people that he had interviewed. During the following decades, and up to the present day, many thousands of NDEs have been investigated by scientists and clinicians. Several of the key investigators in the field recently contributed to a 'multi-disciplinary consensus statement' on the study of NDEs published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* last year (*Ann N Y Acad Sci.* 2022 May; 1511(1): 5-21. doi: 10.1111/nyas.14740).

Like many Christians, I'd also become concerned about the increasing secularisation of the UK and modernised countries generally. I felt we needed new, even radical, ways of making the case for religious belief, particularly to the younger

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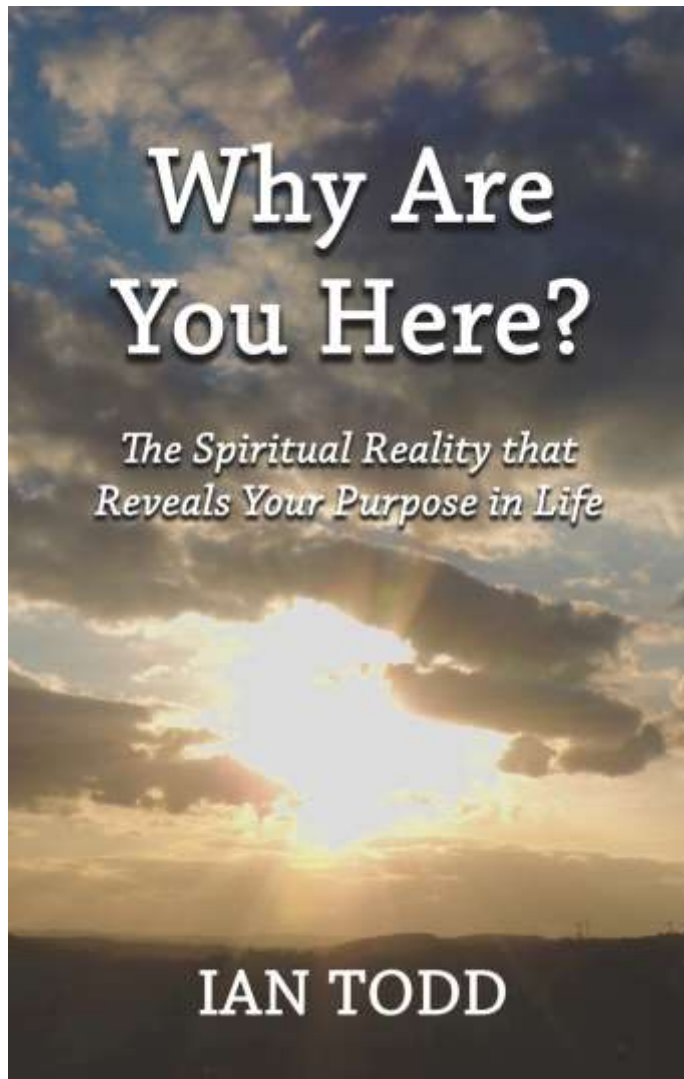


generations of religiously disinterested 'Nones', and that simply trying to work harder at using traditional forms of mission and evangelism has little chance of significant success.

I'm aware that even up to date 'apologetic' arguments for belief in God are relatively indirect, and therefore open to alternative materialist hypotheses. For example, the so-called 'anthropic principle' or 'fine-tuning of the Universe' is consistent with the concept of a Creator Deity but is also compatible with the materialist 'Multiverse Hypothesis'. This leads on to consideration of whether there are aspects of OBEs/NDEs that provide stronger, more direct evidence for the reality of a 'spiritual dimension'. In 2021, the psychologist Robert Epstein published an article entitled *Your brain is not a computer. It's a transducer.* (<https://www.discovermagazine.com/mind/your-brain-is-not-a-computer-it-is-a-transducer>). In line with the dualist philosophies of Plato and Descartes, Epstein proposes that the mind is not generated by the brain but is a separate entity for which the brain is a transducer that channels the mind into our realm of physical matter and energy. If this is true, then it would seem reasonable to propose that the 'mind' is synonymous with the 'soul'.

All of these considerations encouraged me to put together a book making the argument for religious faith in general, and Christianity in particular, based on the modern evidence of OBEs and NDEs. The book is entitled *Why Are You Here? The Spiritual Reality that Reveals Your Purpose in Life.* (SacraSage Press, 2022).

The first part of the evidence-based argument (also employed by Epstein in his article referenced above) does not specifically refer to OBEs/NDEs but is provided by the phenomenon of paradoxical (or terminal) lucidity. This often refers to situations in which patients with advanced dementia, close to the time of death, become remarkably and inexplicably mentally lucid — for example, being able to hold conversations and recall names and events far better than they have for a long time previously. There is currently no materialist explanation for terminal lucidity. From the dualist perspective, however, it might be explained as the freeing of the mind from the constraints of a degenerating brain as death approaches, which thereby allows the conscious mind to express itself



once again through the (still functioning) sub-conscious, before it finally separates entirely from the body at the point of death. The evidential importance of this is that the occurrence of paradoxical lucidity can be verified by independent observers of the patients – such as relatives and medical staff.

A second source of evidence for mind/body dualism, and therefore for a spiritual reality, are cases of veridical OBEs. These occur when someone is close to death or, indeed, defined as clinically dead (e.g., patients who have been in cardiac arrest for more than a few minutes) and yet experience their mind/consciousness/soul leaving their body and observing events in the vicinity of their body from an external vantage point (often near the ceiling). On recovery these patients are then able accurately to recount details of people, events and conversations that occurred around their body whilst they were ‘dead’. Again, the veracity of the patients’ recall can be independently confirmed by those who were present at the time (e.g., medical staff). This again is consistent with the mind/soul being an entity that is separable from the brain, rather than being a product of brain activity.

Moving on the transcendent aspects of NDEs (which often follow the types of OBEs described above), it’s clearly not possible to have verification by independent ‘living’ observers of the testimonies of those who undergo the NDEs (we’ll call them ‘NDErs’). However, there are several aspects of NDEs that are most consistent with their being ‘real’ rather than imaginary events. One that is, again, highlighted by Epstein as evidence for mind/body dualism is the occurrence of visual NDEs in subjects who have been blind from birth. Such individuals do not have visual images in their dreams as they have no concept of the sense of vision. However, when these individuals have NDEs, they accurately describe ‘seeing’ OBE-related phenomena (e.g., their own bodies and their surroundings) as well as transcendent events in a ‘spiritual realm’. Other aspects of NDEs consistent their reality is, firstly, that they are usually lucid, organized experiences as distinct from muddled or vague experiences as might be associated with hallucinations, delirium, or dreams. Secondly, NDEs reported by children under the age of 5 years (who are unlikely to have strongly established religious beliefs or understanding of death) are not significantly different from those reported by older children and adults. Thirdly, NDEs experienced by people of different nationalities and different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds are similar. Conversely, there are no materialist hypotheses, based on biochemical, physiological or psychological mechanisms, that adequately explain all the features of NDEs.

Common features of transcendent NDEs include travelling through a tunnel towards a bright light; meeting a ‘Being of Light’ who radiates overwhelming, unconditional love (often identified as Jesus or God by those of a Christian background); meeting deceased relatives and/or friends; undergoing a ‘life review’ that centres on how they’ve treated others during their life; encountering a barrier and a decision being made to return to their body.

Numerous studies of the lasting effects of their transcendent experiences show that NDErs no longer fear death (because they are convinced of the reality of an Afterlife); they become less materialistic and status-seeking; they are more loving and considerate to others and have an enhanced appreciation of life and of its purpose. This is why I titled my book *Why Are You Here? The Spiritual Reality that Reveals Your Purpose in Life*. Many NDErs believe they have been shown the purpose of life, and that this is to love God and love other people – exactly as Jesus said!

As belief in God continues to decline in the UK – and is lowest amongst those of Generation Z – could it be that God is providing a new source of material to support evangelism in the form of these NDE testimonies? Indeed, one NDEr recalled that the last and most powerful thing that God said to her before she returned to her body was “Tell them what you can remember.” (McVea and Tresniowski, *Waking up in Heaven*, Authentic Media, 2013).



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Thinking the Unthinkable

It's hard to imagine the shock that Giulia Concetto Canella felt when she opened her morning paper on February 9th, 1927. There, staring out at her from the inky Italian newsprint was a photograph of an unmistakable face – the husband she had been told was dead for the past decade was alive.

Captain Giulio Canella was believed to be dead by everyone except for his wife. That was the explanation, reluctantly accepted by others, for his disappearance from the battlefield on November the 25th, 1916. Officially he was 'missing in action'. The former headmaster and leading Catholic Philosopher had not been captured, at least not according to the official records, but nor was his body among the identifiable dead recovered from the battlefield. He had, simply, disappeared. Nothing had been heard of him, he was gone – surely forever. But Giulia didn't give up hope.

And now, staring out of the pages of a newspaper, were the familiar features of a handsome man with a fine beard. He looked well put together, he was, according to reports, calm and very courteous – and seemed well spoken and educated. However, he said that he had absolutely no idea who he was, and no memory of where he had been. After a spate of thefts from the Jewish graveyard in Turin he had been caught in the act of stealing a vase, when the Carabinieri detained him, he was distraught and threatened to kill himself. He had no identity papers, no one knew who he was, or where he was from.

"He has amnesia," declared the psychiatrists, reasoning that some trauma had effectively wiped, or blocked his memory. He was remanded to a



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mental hospital, designated 'inconnu' (unknown) in the hope that perhaps his memory would return. It didn't. He became known as 'smemorato di Collegno' (the 'amnesiac of Collegno') – the term is still used in Italy to refer to someone who has forgotten, or apparently forgotten, something. At Collegno mental hospital, where he was detained, he was allocated the patient number 44170.

He spent his time reading and studying, he wrote essays and drew pictures. His drawing showed promise, his writing was erratic, with odd grammatical errors, but articulate and interesting. The medics considered what to do next. "Surely someone, somewhere, knows him," they thought. With this hope in mind a publicity campaign was launched which resulted, eventually, in Giulia spotting the photograph and recognizing, with a sharp intake of breath, her hitherto missing spouse. Giulia had never given up hope that her 'missing in action' husband would one day return. Others had given up years before, but not her. She arranged to visit the hospital, looking at him she marvelled at how he had aged, but it didn't take long for her to be sure. "It's him," she insisted. For his part, the unknown man said that he thought the woman who kept staring at him seemed familiar, and confided vague memories of a family to doctors. Giulia and Giulio had two children, Rita and Giuseppe, it all seemed to make sense.

Eventually the authorities were convinced by Giulia's entreaties. This must indeed be the missing Captain, not seen since his troop had been pinned down by heavy fire on a blood-soaked hillside in Macedonia. Something must have happened that day to traumatise him so severely that his memories had been wiped away, they thought.

The happy reunion was a symbol of hope for others who had also lost loved ones on the battlefield, a sign that the hopeless might continue to hope still, a good news story in an age of worry.

That was, until the arrest.

Giulia was a prosperous woman from a wealthy family, she owned land in Brazil, she was well educated – was she the type to be too ready to believe this amnesiac was really her missing husband? Had she really fallen into a path of wishful thinking, tricking herself into believing that the



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amnesiac of Collegno was really her beloved spouse? Apparently so.

Only days after the happy reunion an anonymous letter arrived at the office of the Quaestor of Turin. The letter said that the mysterious amnesiac, so recently identified as Giulio Canella, was really a petty crook called Mario Bruneri. Bruneri had a long history of involvement in fraud, identity theft, violence, and various other crimes. He had gone into hiding after abandoning his family and running off with Camilla Ghedini, his lover and alleged accomplice. He was on the run, due to serve two years for a series of offences. According to the letter Bruneri was using amnesia as a ruse to escape custody, latching on to the wealthy Giulia as a ticket to a better life.

The amnesiac was recalled to Turin. Mario Bruneri's wife, Rosa Negra, and family were sent for, and identified him at once as their missing relative. Eventually fingerprint analysis showed a clear match between the amnesiac and the fugitive Bruneri.

Giulia was furious. She had lost her husband once – she wasn't going to lose him again. A protracted legal fight began, the amnesiac served Bruneri's two-year sentence, but never admitted his identity as he awaited trial for other offences. Giulia was a powerful woman, with influential supporters and powerful connections. They went to work campaigning for the amnesiac's release, and ultimately their campaign prevailed.

When he was released, in order to escape the scandal that surrounded them, the Canella family moved to Brazil where 'Professor Giulio Canella' took on academic study and work. When he sent some of his philosophical writings to Pope Pious XI he received an official blessing addressed to 'the most illustrious Dr Giulio Canella.' The amnesiac professor died in Rio de Janeiro in 1941.

Mystery swirled around the figure of the amnesiac of Collegno, was he truly the honourable philosopher from a well to do family, or was he actually the petty crook and con man? If he was the latter, how had he been able to assume the identity of the former?

Ultimately, the objective lens of science held the answer. A DNA test in 2014 showed that Camillo Canella, born after the reunion of Giulia and 'Giulio', didn't share paternal DNA with his older brother who had been born before the war. They were half-brothers only, they only had their mother in common. Whether this was a knowing con, or a genuine case of amnesia remains unknown, the transformation of a rough conman into a cultured professor continues to confuse matters.

"It's the confirming evidence trap," said my friend Frank. "Without even realising it, people look for evidence to support what they already believe to be

true. And then they discount anything that goes against what they believe. Sometimes people call it confirmation bias."

"How do you avoid a trap like that?" I wondered aloud, knowing that I, too, am prone to seeing confirmation of my own views when I look at evidence that an objective observer might consider questionable.

"You have to try and listen to a variety of voices," he suggested. "Even, or especially ones that you don't think you're going to agree with. Oh, and when you want someone to tell you their opinion on something, avoid telling them what you think first. People are likely to give you the answer they think will please you, and that only serves to support your view."

"A vicious cycle," I said. "You could say that" he said. "I see this all the time in religious circles," I said. "Oh, it's everywhere," he replied. "Look at politics, look at conspiracy theories, look at more or less... everything." "How do you learn to think the truly unthinkable?" I asked him. "If I knew that," he said, with a laugh, "I could make a fortune."

Others think they do know the answer. Albert Einstein came up with his previously unthinkable 'theory of relativity' by way of a number of 'thought experiments', hypothetical problems that demanded carefully worked out answers. Proponents of this way of thinking claim that the careful structure of a good thought experiment helps you think the unthinkable, avoiding the confirming evidence trap by ensuring that answers are worked out carefully, and rationally, demanding that evidence is tested carefully.

But Einstein was working within a set of scientific parameters, he was thinking within something some philosophers describe as 'the immanent frame' – a 'modern' way of looking at the world that insists answers can always be found if logic is pursued with enough attention, if evidence is examined with enough rigour. Religious thought, though, has a hinterland that precedes the immanent frame. In the world of religion and spirituality the possibility of 'transcendence' – something beyond the entirely explainable – is sometimes extended.

Sometimes it's felt that in order to be truly 'progressive' we must fit our thinking within the immanent frame. Much of the theology that stems from the nineteenth century liberal turn is, effectively, theology done from within the immanent frame. Many of us within the progressive movement are here precisely because we've grown dissatisfied with the recourse to 'mystery' of those who refuse to properly analyse evidence that doesn't confirm their illogical, or superstitious, conclusions.

But what if we too fall victim, too readily, to the confirming evidence trap? How ready are we, really, to think the unthinkable?

Artificial Intelligence

Until this year, I had heard of 'artificial intelligence', but never given it serious consideration. It was an intriguing concept relevant to the future but of little immediate concern, something with appeal to sci-fi enthusiasts rather than a reality of rapidly increasing significance, not least to those of us who identify ourselves as in some sense 'Christian'. So, unlike some readers of PV, no doubt, I am certainly not qualified in this field. But my ignorance gives me every reason to try and make sense of AI and search for a tenable Christian response.

Artificial intelligence, Google explains, 'is a constellation of many different technologies working together to enable machines to sense, comprehend, act and learn with human-like levels of intelligence... technologies like machine learning and natural language processing are all part of the AI landscape... There are two basic categories: *narrow* which performs a single task (like weather prediction) and *general* where (as in sci-fi films) sentient machines emulate human intelligence – thinking strategically, abstractly and creatively'.

Its impact

The idea of AI was conceived in the 1950s to '60s. 1966 was a key date when MIT professor Joseph Weizenbaum created the first chatbot in which someone typed a message on an electric typewriter connected to a mainframe computer and got a vaguely intelligent reply. The concept and reality of AI then steadily gestated until it was quietly born, to little fanfare, sometime during the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

Whatever the chronology, it seems that in 2023 the whole world knows about the baby. It's screaming its head off! Newspaper and magazine articles, radio and TV programmes, seminars and conferences, social media and personal conversations, are all gossiping about the precocious child.

In the July/August issue of Reform (the URC Monthly), editor Stephen Jenkins wrote: 'Now we seem to be at the dawn of the automation of intellectual work... The first wave of automation led to the invention of unions, social democracy, communist revolution and the consumer economy... Who can imagine where this second wave of automation will take us?'

Writing in the BBC Music magazine, music critic Richard Morrison wrote: 'What's obvious in recent months is the huge leap that AI scientists have made with programmes drawing on database comprising billions of words and images... It's entirely likely that AI will change musical life considerably, not least in the production of recordings'.



Edward Hulme was ordained as a Baptist before joining the URC. He has promoted progressive Christianity through preaching, teaching, lecturing and writing.

Speaking at the first UN Security Council session on AI, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said: 'The malicious use of AI systems for terrorist, criminal or state purposes could cause horrific levels of death and destruction'. James Cleverly, session chair, called for global governance, warning 'no country will be untouched by AI'. So, it seems the world is now waking up to its reality and great potential.

The human condition

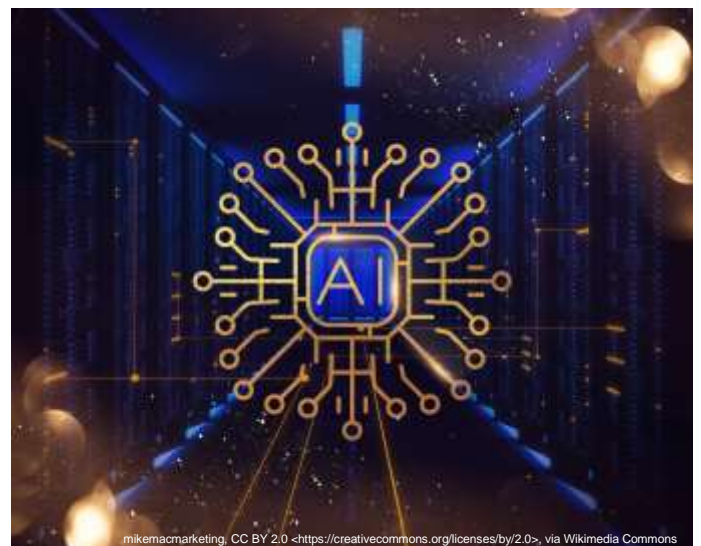
AI is essentially a human product (but not ultimately, as I observe later) and therefore, like everything Homo Sapiens discovers or invents, subject to the human condition. As the Bible, sacred literature generally, the story of humanity, personal observation and experience, all show, people live their lives torn between the two poles of good and evil. Which means that artificial intelligence can be both a blessing and a bane.

A bane?

In July, the National Crime Agency asserted that AI could further fuel an epidemic of child sexual abuse. The threat will only grow as fake images flood the market. Director-General Graeme Biggar explained that people in online abuse forums are already excitedly discussing what AI could do for them.

A warning comes from the education sector about the rise of ChatGPT, a generative AI programme that can write essays, solve problems and create computer codes. It is accelerating cheating in both coursework and exam contexts.

So great is the worry that AI technology, giving humanity 'godlike' power, will be used for horrifically



negative purposes that a global AI safety summit was held at Bletchley Park just before this issue of PV. A watershed moment in AI development, it is claimed, is rapidly approaching.

A blessing?

Last summer, a UN 'AI for Good' global summit was held in Geneva. A professor and pioneer in robotics gave examples of how robotics – humanoid or otherwise – can already be of huge domestic help, enabling people to continue living at home rather than move to supported accommodation.

At the same conference, it was shown how cutting-edge AI technology is improving surgical planning, guidance, review and supremely precision. It is working in all areas of healthcare and helping join up the different stages of the care pathway. If you've had a stent inserted, AI may well have created a 3D map of your blood vessels to guide the surgeon's navigation through them.

AI can help to achieve a vast range of benefits – providing vital information for tackling the climate crisis and deforestation, biodiversity and flooding threats. Max Tegmark, professor of physics and AI researcher at MIT claims that artificial intelligence 'could be the greatest empowerment movement in human history'.

In terms of *technology*, secular prophets claim AI could become either the Destroyer or Saviour of Planet Earth!

Our response

How should we respond to this awesome prospect, as ordinary citizens and in particular Christians? I can only offer my personal thoughts.

My first point is that we need to remember that ultimately AI is a function of Creation. The forces, laws of physics, potential for a life-form able to produce and manage it, were all in essence present from the moment of the Big Bang. So, in a very real sense, humans are actually *stewards* of the extraordinary power we label 'artificial intelligence'. We are pivotal in deciding whether it will be used for good or evil. It is you, me and all our fellow humans who must direct this technological chameleon.

Does the Bible help us?

There's obviously no explicit let alone implicit reference to artificial intelligence in the Bible. The whole concept was way beyond the horizon of societies still excited by wheels and pulleys. Yet, I believe, the Bible genuinely offers vital clues to what our response should be.

Embracing over a thousand years of a people's history and reflection, telling their story - by legend, poetry, rhetoric and document – of its struggles and conflicts, folly and wisdom, despair and hope, both Hebrew and Christian scriptures demonstrate how comprehensively it is people's spiritual, moral and physical condition that make or mar the health of civilizations and their impact on the planet.



The great choice

The people highlighted in both testaments had constantly to choose between good and evil, heeding or shunning laws and prophets, obeying or smothering the 'still, small voice' of the Spirit within.

The legend of Adam and Eve is essentially about such choice. In the middle of the garden encompassing the starstruck couple, the Lord had provided a tree that gave life and the knowledge of what is good and what is bad.

A Deuteronomist claims Moses put the challenge starkly and memorably: 'Today I give you a choice between a blessing and a curse...If you and your descendants turn back to God and with all your heart obey God's commands, you will prosper...'

The prophets hammered home the same message. Confronting the morally decadent society of his day, Jeremiah urged people to change their values and priorities: 'Let not the wise boast of their wisdom nor the valiant of their valour; let not the wealthy boast of their riches: but if anyone must boast, let them boast that they understand and know God'.

In sharp contrast to the power politics of Rome and its whole ethos of domination, exploitation and wealth accumulation, Jesus urged people to 'be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and what God requires – when you are so focused your true needs will be met'.

Paul expressed the age-old choice in his letter to the Galatians: 'There's a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit... these two ways of life are antithetical... Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?'

Conclusion

The Bible witnesses to the truth that the quality of every inter-human action and every human interaction with our whole habitat depends ultimately on the spiritual and moral choices we make. And, like it or not, our 'whole habitat' now includes AI.

Faith communities need to get across the message that management of AI should indeed be informed by scientific and sociological evidence and enlightened by sound ethical principles, but must be *based on timeless spiritual foundations*, such as those brilliantly pin-pointed in the life, teaching and self-giving of Jesus of Nazareth.

Metaphysics and the Climate Crisis

Metaphysics explores the presuppositions historically underlying the policies of the scientific, theological and other disciplines. It examines those statements which are not based on prior suppositions. So for theology an absolute presupposition would be 'God exists'. There is nothing prior to God on which the concept of God is dependent. The dictionary says metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with first principles, especially of existing and knowing. Metaphysics works in historical settings. For instance, John Locke's seventeenth century theory of parliamentary democracy is based on the possession of property by participants. This was a factor considered to be absolutely indispensable for participation in civic life and it was held tenaciously for a very long time. It was an absolute presupposition during that period of time.

Civilizations fail when they lose contact with their fundamental presuppositions as established in their moral life. The beginnings of metaphysical philosophy may have been set out by Aristotle in the third century BCE but it didn't prevent the Graeco-Roman civilization from imploding due to moral decay. Rome was built on slavery and enormous wealth with political power controlled by relatively few families. There may have been adversaries warring on the frontiers but that was because they detected the weaknesses brought about by moral decay and were looking for a share of the wealth. Civilizations implode through moral decay. They fail to hold to their absolute moral presuppositions.

It is instructive to look at our Judeo-Christian heritage and the foundational myth of Adam and Eve. Life was paradise until Adam, representative of humankind, eat of the tree of knowledge. God sensed danger and expelled him from the Garden of Eden. By eating of the tree of knowledge Adam had taken responsibility for maintaining paradise but as he might equally fail to fulfil his responsibility and destroy paradise, he was expelled in order to prove himself. Deuteronomy warned him he must choose between life and death. Today's concern about climate change is a mirror image of that mythical story. Over the centuries we have gained the knowledge; are we using it responsibly?

The garden of Eden story is not historical truth, it is moral truth. Our advanced western society has adopted a superiority over nature. It believes it is invincible and has plundered nature for its own benefit, completely losing the understanding that our early ancestors had of living in relative harmony with nature. Believing that we are independent of any of the constraints of nature has led our technologically-advanced western world into moral decay by forming a society structured on inequality



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and the unrestrained exploitation of the natural world. We've lost sight of the essential metaphysical understanding of sustaining the garden of Eden.

Theologically, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God. Scientifically, in the beginning there was a point of inconceivable density which exploded and over time created our present universe. At that original point everything was in contact and so interdependent that the explosion was able to proceed on the basis of timings of a millionth of a second for this universe to come into existence. Without that timing there would have been no universe. This interdependency remains fundamental to the good health and evolution of everything. That ultimate metaphysical presupposition we call God is present at all times and has to be respected at all times.

The philosophically Greek-trained Christian Fathers of the early centuries struggled with the Deuteronomic warning and the need to save their Graeco-Roman civilization from decay. Their saviour was Jesus of Nazareth and because they accepted that his teaching was fundamental to right living (another absolute presupposition), they also sought to deify him, something not unusual in those far-off days. They conceived three absolute presuppositions which they expounded as three aspects or faces of God. God the Father was the source of everything created; God the Holy Spirit was God's action in sustaining creation through evolution; and God the Son specifically embraced the potential for Adam (humankind) to become whole and holy and be re-admitted to the garden of Eden (resurrection). For Christianity these understandings are metaphysical absolutes for the good health of society and civilization.

Is there time for that euphemistically-termed climate crisis to be rolled back?

What is the prospect for Jesus's teaching to be enthusiastically and universally embraced whether explicitly as Christianity or implicitly as righteousness or right living?

Dispossessed and desperate people, also made in the image of God, are already clamouring at our frontiers. We don't really need a knowledge of metaphysics to tell us what is needed to resist moral decay and avoid the collapse of western civilization. Do we?

Look Inwards

We are all asking ourselves what we should do as our congregations shrink and we look ahead to a time when our beloved building will become a carpet warehouse. We must grow, we cry. And, of course, we can't.

There is no longer an incentive for people to come to church. When church and state were as one, and heaven beckoned for the good people who did as they were bid, and hell yawned open for the recalcitrant, then people did. Just to be sure, your church, to which you were bound to go by law, had a huge doom painting showing you exactly that, and at home your children reminded you where your duty lay with their rhyme of the alliterative sheep. One bag for the master, one for the dame and one for the little boy who lives down the lane. Was there ever a more searing put-down of the local parish priest? Well, you can't do that any more.

So you have to attract people in and what have you to offer? A book that is hundreds of years old and a leader who was a carpenter's son in 1st century Palestine. And you are surprised that people prefer to go to the garden centre or a stately home. At least then you get to come home with something to show for your visit; a pot plant or a lovely badge. We were given stars for attendance at Sunday School and when we had enough we got a sticker. What are you offering? Perhaps you ought to think about it. You think you are offering salvation through Christ but in fact it is hymns / prayers / readings / an address. Do people want any of those things? Why do you go to church? Answer on one side of the paper only. Frivolous answers: I like the hymns, to see my friends, are perfectly acceptable. And what do you get out of it? An interesting address, a cup of coffee and a chance to chat. Oops. No, spiritual uplift and growth is what I meant to say. Oh yes, and the possibility of not spending eternity being tortured in hell as decided by your Ever Loving Father. Children who are naughty get sent to their room or have their pocket money stopped but God doesn't do things by halves.

You want us to believe that your glorious leader died for our sins. What sins? Oh yes, an imaginary woman eating an imaginary apple. I used to get so cross at my CofE primary school. The very last thing you do is create something really desirable, tell people they can't have it and then stick it in front of them. If God knows everything then surely God could have foreseen that. It's a myth!

I am trying to persuade the congregation of my church to have a service where we think about the really important things as stated above: why? and what? And then I want us to put up big notices outside which say 'This is what we do' and 'This is why we do it'. It may not bring any new people in but



at least we shall have got things clear in our minds. And then we'll have to work out in real terms exactly what it will cost to keep our beautiful building open and clean and warm and waterproof. And then we decide. In a moment of despair one church treasurer told me that if we sold the building we could all go off for a fortnight's holiday in the Bahamas. At the time it seemed like a fairly sensible thing to do as we sat shivering Sunday after Sunday with rainwater dropping gently into buckets.

So, my advice to you, is to stop looking outwards and start looking in. Are you sure that the style of worship suits everyone?

I have Anglican friends who love the ritual of communion but hate the words and who look at me as if I was an idiot when I say, 'Well, write new ones.' Challenge members of your congregation to come up with a completely different way of worshipping once a month, possibly on a weekday evening. I've collected a fair few over the years. One of my favourites is the circle service. The leader chooses a theme and announces it in advance, chooses hymns and prayers and usually one reading. Other members bring their own readings and their own thoughts and ideas. It is part service, part discussion and part meditation. I remember going with a German friend to a wonderful service which started with the minister, garbed, going through a ritual and then we went up the stairs and he, in mufti, delivered an address which we then discussed over coffee. The best, surely, of both worlds.

I miss no longer living near the Whipsnade Tree Cathedral; an entirely open-air service with added bird song and flowers, a tree to lean against instead of a horrid pew to sit in.

I'm sure if you put your minds to it you could come up with lots of ideas. So, think about the why and how, and share them. And then, as my granny used to say, you'll have diamonds in your crown.

Dorothy Haughton

Imagined teachings of Jesus

The three friends of love

The next day, once the men and women from the East had left, Jesus and his disciples began the journey from Capernaum to Chorazin. About halfway they stopped to take shade in a cedar grove and a religious teacher came to them.

“Rabbi” the religious teacher said, “I have heard many stories of your wisdom and great acts. But tell me, of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus looked up at the tall trees that surrounded them. “The most important one” he said, “is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is to love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”

The religious teacher moved closer towards Jesus, taking up a position among the disciples.

“Well said, Rabbi. I can see that the stories about you are well founded. But, forgive me, what do you say of love itself? Surely it is more than burnt offerings and sacrifices?”

Jesus stood up and began to walk around the cedar grove, collecting a number of sticks. After a short time, he returned and began to arrange the sticks he had collected on the ground, in the form of a triangle.

“You are correct” said Jesus, “when you say that love is more than burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

He then turned to the three sticks.

“Truly I tell you, love goes to the very heart of God and the very heart of God cannot be spoken of. But let me tell you about three friends of love.”

Jesus picked up one of the sticks.

“Consider the craftsman at work. Each movement he makes is considered, always a response to what is unfolding before him. He never reacts. So too with love. Love is always a response, never a reaction.”

Placing the first stick back in its position, he then picked up a second stick.

“Consider the river rushing over the rocks. It does not plan its route before it sets off from the source, but rather flows spontaneously, never knowing what will be around the next bend. So too with love. Love is always spontaneous. It cannot be planned.”

“But Rabbi” interrupted the religious teacher, “how can love be both like the craftsman and the river? How can love be both a thoughtful response and never planned? Isn’t this a contradiction?”

“To the eyes of the world, yes” said Jesus. “But to those that see with the eyes of God, such is the



Robin Drummond

works in education, lives near Reading with his wife and two boys and attends the Galilee group.

wonderful shape of love. Observe, the third friend of love will reconcile the first two.”

Placing the second stick back in its position, Jesus then picked up the last of the three sticks.

“Consider the beautiful song. It does not come to be by accident. Rather, it is the sweet fruit of creativity and choice. So too with love. Love is always a creative choice, never an accident.”

Jesus paused.

“It is as such that love is both the considered response of the craftsman and the unplanned, spontaneous flow of the river. Listen carefully. Choice is the very place where heaven and earth meet -and that place is called Love.”

After he had finished saying these things Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Chorazin.

Limerick Bible

The not so wise men were misled
When they looked to the stars for a bed,
For theirs did a back roll
Right into a black hole
And left them with sat nav instead.

When we try to explore Revelations,
There’s nothing but fears and frustrations.
To add to the load,
It’s written in code –
So much for concise calculations.

The Prodigal Son is a fable
To show how forgiveness is able.
But the poor fatted calf
Was short of a laugh
When it found itself served on the table.

Chris Avis

Local groups

Please contact group convenors or see the relevant PCN Britain web page for further details. Newcomers are always welcome.

Abingdon Cliff Marshall
01235 530480 cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our meetings continue to be held on Zoom which enables friends from further a field to join in as well as giving us the opportunity to use internet-based resources more easily. After making use of video talks, such as Richard Holloway's on 'Forgiving' from The Heart of Things, during the autumn, we shall take the opportunity to think about the ways in which PCN nationally and locally might develop. We shall be represented at the 20th anniversary meeting in Reading and will use the ideas and issues raised there to focus our thoughts for the future. One advantage of holding meetings on Zoom is that people can join us from wherever they are if they have the technology and we enjoy receiving visits from members of other groups. As has become usual, a meal together for the members who live close will mark the start of the New Year in Jan. In Feb and March our online meetings will be held on the first Tuesday

Birmingham Richard Tetlow
0121 4494892 richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are still running and in person on the first Monday of the month. Perhaps the highlight has been a young non-binary theological student we invited to speak about their vocation. Lately we discussed the Reith Lectures in turn about four Freedoms, including freedom from fear and freedom of speech and then 2 sessions on why we all go to church. That's usually about 10 of us. Beginning on 4 Dec we plan to discuss episodes of 'The Archbishop Interviews' with Justin Welby and guests who will include Elif Shafak, the stirring Turkish British author.

Bolton Jim Hollyman
01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are continuing discussion of Diana Butler Bass's "Christianity after Religion" – subtitled "The end of the church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening". Having reached chapter 7 "The Great Reversal" at our Oct meeting,

we considered Diana's Statement "the Great Reversal is the Great Returning of Christianity back toward what Jesus preached: a beloved and loving community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God's reign of mercy and justice". Some of us could see that happening in some places and hoped that it might be true in many others. Surely what the world needs? In Nov we will have looked at chapter 8 – "Great Awakening". Looking ahead I read "...the great awakenings in American history were all Christian revitalization movements that brought personal piety and also brought transformation in the society. But the next great awakening will have to be an interfaith awakening". It sounds like we will be having some challenging discussion. On 7 Dec we will be looking at the last chapter "Performing awakening".

We meet on the first Wed each month at 1.30-3 pm, always ending with some moments of silent prayer. We meet at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. In addition we send out a Zoom link each month

Cornwall Gwen Wills
gwen.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are continuing to meet monthly and we are delighted to welcome new members. We have had several enquiries from people from both ends of the county about the possibility of joining us via Zoom. At our last meeting we discussed the possibility of setting this up but have decided to put it on hold for the time being until we can iron out possible technical issues. At present our meetings tend to be informal and discussion emanates from things we have read and shared experiences. We have discussed articles from Progressive Voices, the relevance of organised church today and personal changing theology. However we hope to invite some guest speakers to some of our meetings next year.

Edgehill Val Trinder
01926 641564 v.m.trinder@btinternet.com

Our group has been meeting for 18 months and we have enjoyed discussions over a range of topics.

Two of us have also been attending the Galilee Course with Tim Yeager which we've found very interesting. Last month our topic was 'Other Faiths', and we had a wide-ranging discussion (sometimes off the topic – as tends to happen!) We discussed our own experiences of knowing people of other faiths and how there is a 'golden thread' of compassion at the heart of other faiths and religions; of loving your neighbour as yourself. The parable of the Good Samaritan was the basis of a good discussion about acceptance of others and the need to move away from tribalism. We agreed that as science finds out more and more about the universe, the more difficult it is to know the truth about anything, and that the way we live our lives is the most important thing; to be compassionate towards others – the 'doing' rather than the belief. We are a small friendly group and are happy to hear from any other PCN members in and around South Warwickshire who would like to come along. We meet on the last Thursday of the month.

Hampshire Carole Wynn
01329 745687 carole.wynn@pcnbritain.org.uk

In 2005 Martin Godfrey created what he called the 'Hampshire Hub', a network of PCN groups for people living in and around Hampshire. Most no longer meet but there are still two groups in south Hampshire. The Portsmouth Group has seven members who travel from Fareham, Havant, Southampton and Southsea. It meets on a Thursday, on a monthly basis, in Buckland URC. Most of us share lunch in the church's café, 12.00-1.00pm. We then discuss from 1.00 to 2.30pm. The Southampton Group has six members, who live in Southampton or travel from Romsey and Fareham. It meets on a Tuesday, on a monthly basis, in a members home. We discuss from 10.30am to 12 noon. In 2023 both groups are reading 'The Jesus Myth' by Chris Scott. The Southampton Group usually discusses a book over a year or so, but the Portsmouth Group has discussed a variety of topics, often been based on articles or DVDs.

Newcastle Liz Temple
01207 505564 liz.temple@pcnbritain.org.uk

We planned a relaxed start to the Autumn season of meetings, deciding to bring our best holiday reading books/poems etc to the Sept

gathering for description and discussion. Everybody contributed to the wealth of material before us, with extracts quoted from Julian of Norwich to Roger McGough. The theme of discussing literature continued into our Oct meeting, ably led by our local member Jean who had given us an intriguing title for the session, 'Participatory exploration from a given theme or stimulus, working in pairs'. We democratically chose the stimulus to work with from those on offer: 'Jabberwocky' by Lewis Carroll. Thoughts and comments started with the vivid images and 'nonsense' language in the poem, leading on to deepening discussions about manipulation/brain washing and 'demonising the other'. Such a thought-provoking and memorable time resulted from a poem normally consigned to childhood picture books. I look forward to the rest of our programme, with themes drawn from more conventional sources!

Northallerton Peter Brophy
01609 761182 peter.brophy@pcnbritain.org.uk

The group is coming to the end of a series of discussions of John Shelby Spong's 'Unbelievable: why neither ancient creeds nor the reformation can produce a living faith today', which has generated helpful insights into a progressive approach to Christianity for our fairly new group. We have been meeting for a year now with a stable membership of around 13 - more would be welcome! We meet at 2.00 for 2.30pm (tea and coffee available) then discussion until 4.00pm, on the first Tue each month. In Dec we will be moving on to discuss McLaren's 'The great spiritual migration: how the world's largest religion is seeking a better way to be Christian'.

Teesside Michael Wright
07966 527697 michael.wright@pcnbritain.org.uk

We meet at the Friends Meeting House in Great Ayton on the second Tue each month, gathering from 2pm for a discussion from 2.30 to 4.00pm. We have recently turned our attention to Karen Armstrong's 'Sacred Earth', looking at how Christian and other religious beliefs help us understand our integral involvement in the natural environment. We are quite a small group and welcome new members.

West Yorks Michael Burn
07712620303 michael.burn@pcnbritain.org.uk

We have not met recently. Members were lost as a result of Covid, new work commitments, and leaving the area, as well as other personal reasons. However, joining us is the new Holmfirth u3a "Thinking Faith for the Disillusioned" group. We are looking forward to our Nov meeting when we will discuss Tony Rutherford's, "Meeting Christianity Again For The First Time".

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth
radpilgrims@gmail.com

A venue for our meetings is still not totally resolved. Currently we meet every month, alternating between a member's house in Tunbridge Wells on a weekday evening with a predetermined subject for discussion, and a more social meeting in a restaurant in the centre of town on a Saturday. In addition we are continuing with a weekly morning Zoom meeting in which the subject for discussion is agreed at the time, often the subject matter is from members' current concerns or items from the news. This meeting is appreciated by those who find it difficult to get to the monthly gatherings. Anybody in the area who would like to join are welcome to contact us at the above address. We are the only group in the southeast.

Living

Yesterday has gone,
learn from it,
but don't live there.

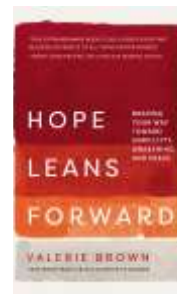
Tomorrow hasn't arrived,
have your hopes and dreams,
but don't live there.

We have only today;
live it to the full
so that those around you
feel the warmth of your love.
Live there.

David Kemp

Reviews

Hope Leans Forward by Valerie Brown, Broadleaf Books



Valerie is American, a Quaker and Zen Buddhist, and a woman of colour. She has particular connections with Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Village and with the Quaker Retreat Centre,

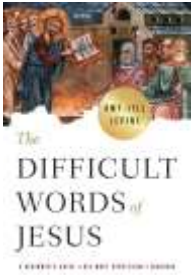
Pendle Hill. And much more. What I like about her book is that it is very personal about her spiritual journey. It is full of imperfection and struggles. Her early life experiences mean she has struggled much and suffered much. She writes about suffering, and the notion of 'no mud, no Lotus'. On the way she discovers breathing practices, yoga practices, mindfulness exercises, the value of community, Buddhism and Quakers. The above provides a potent mix for her journey within herself. Her struggle is to get out of her head and thinking, in order to experience the wisdom of her body, and to find a balance. How many of us need to learn how to experience that! She also struggles deeply with her own inner 'demons', those prejudices and distorted ways of thinking that she has brought from her past. She also writes about other people's life journeys, people who have inspired her, as a way of spreading hope and inspiration.

This is a contrast to many spiritual books that can seem a bit clinical, written in monasteries, and divorced from 'real' life. I find it much easier to identify with Valerie. For her, there are many ways to travel our spiritual journey. There is wisdom here. She uses a Buddhist structure and includes practices from Plum Village as well as Quaker Queries. She covers the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. Thank you Valerie for sharing your spiritual journey.

Richard Eddleston

The Difficult Words of Jesus by Amy-Jill Levine, Canterbury Press

This book reminds us of why we need Jewish New Testament scholars. In her introduction, the author proudly tells the story of her son's bar mitzvah, at which he read the passages in Deuteronomy

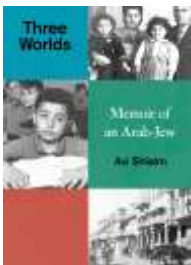


instructing the Israelites to annihilate the other inhabitants of Canaan, their children and their animals, without mercy. He began his interpretation by saying, "I do not like

this text, but I am proud to be a part of a tradition that allows me to wrestle with it". Christianity has been locked into an over-reverent, submissive reading of Scripture, and we are just beginning to appreciate the value of the Jewish approach. Levine does her work very thoroughly. Her first chapter is a detailed, informative exposition of the story of the rich young ruler, encouraging us to wonder who he was, why he came to Jesus, what he was looking for, and what became of him afterwards, and to think about the implications of all the possible answers to those questions. She goes on to deal in a similar way with other sayings and actions of Jesus, including the call to "hate" one's family, the call to be a *doulos* (which literally means "slave"), Jesus' ambiguous relationship with Gentiles, his references to eternal punishment in hell, and the demonization of Jews in John's Gospel. The Bible, says Levine, is not an answer sheet but "a book that helps us ask the right questions" (p. 151). The courageous approach is "to address our problematic texts rather than to ignore them" (p. 152). This is an extremely useful and thought-provoking book, well worth reading but keeping for reference, thinking, and group discussion.

Ray Vincent

Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab Jew by Avi Shlaim, OneWorld



If you thought the complicated situation in Israel/Palestine was a Jewish/Muslim issue, this memoir by Avi Shlaim may demonstrate that there is even more

to it than you thought. Shlaim is an Iraqi Jew who spent most of his childhood in Israel. This book is a memoir, describing the life of his family before he was born, his own brief time living in Baghdad and the effect that the creation of the State of Israel had on middle eastern Jews.

Just before I read the book, it had occurred to me to ask whether there were conflicts in Israel between Ashkenazi Jews - the ones who suffered in the Holocaust - and the Sephardim – those who came from the Arab world, North Africa and the Iberian peninsula. For Shlaim, there most certainly are.

In this very personal memoir Shlaim contends that since Jews and Muslims lived perfectly happily together in Iraq, the same is possible in Israel, if there was a will to do so. He also believes that Zionists deliberately attacked Jewish institutions in Baghdad to persuade Jews there that they were no longer safe and convince them they should move to Israel. This, he says, was to bring the maximum number of Jews to the country, ensuring it was a majority Jewish state. He believes he has evidence, in the form a document which has no headings or signatures to prove its provenance – an odd way for an Oxford professor emeritus to present a case. In Israel, Shlaim experienced prejudice against Sephardim who were considered of lower ability than Ashkenazi and ended up at school in the UK in his late teens. He describes Israel as an apartheid state, although he doesn't see the requirement of non-Muslims to pay a special tax in Baghdad as creating a similar situation.

For anyone not already aware of the Sephardi/Ashkenazi element of the Jewish nation, this will open up new questions, but I suggest that a balanced picture requires more research, especially in the light of recent events in the region.

Heather Smith

Deconstructing Whiteness, Empire and Mission, eds. Anthony G Reddie, Carol Troupe, SCM



The book's genesis is the Council for World Mission, created mainly from agencies of the Reformed tradition, as are most of the contributors. The aim, writes Anthony Reddie - lead editor

and Oxford's Professor of Black Theology - is an exploration of the dynamics of empire and the central role of white privilege in shaping our history and world.

The book is a substantial critique of missionary activity, mainly by those

from the majority world. The contributors cover the impact of colonialism, the problem of whiteness in theology and western society, and the avoidance by many theologians of confronting past legacies. It includes a powerful call for the decolonization of theological curricula and inclusion of perspectives and theologies of the majority world.

A major part, 'perspectives of history', provides case studies of missionary reports; contributors show how the wisdom and insights of indigenous communities were disregarded. Peniel Rajkumar notes how the Dalits 'converted the missionaries to the liberative dimensions of the gospel and the heinous nature of the caste system'. The chapter by Jione Havea, a Tongan Methodist, is essential reading. He writes 'the colonizers came from Europe and colonized our minds and hearts, faiths and hopes, by... appropriating (stealing, theologizing) our languages and worldviews (myths)'. For Tongans 'light and darkness are co-dependent. [This] contradicts the view of ...missionaries that darkness was "not good", and even wicked'. Havea adds 'healers guided their families and communities and ... were fair in complexion and fair in their judgement and counsel; they were fair both on the outside and the inside but [missionaries] relegated them to the realm of darkness and death. The myths of fairness were ... stolen ...to justify why natives should need them and their teachings.'

Later parts include self-critical reflection on colonialism and whiteness. The immigrant experience in the UK, where churches failed to engage with Caribbean migrants on the basis of equality, and the assumptions of 'knowing where you're coming from' and other painful personal situations are explored. Although written by academics the book's challenges are made in accessible language and it provides new insights for church history and theology.

Peter Varney

True to God, True to Now by Robin Drummond, self-published
roboshu78@gmail.com

Striking a balance between being 'spiritual' and still living in the real world is something many Christians, and those who wouldn't necessarily



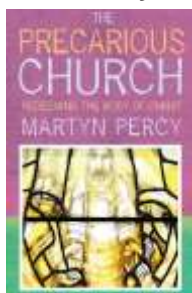
identify themselves as believers, can find difficult. Robin has written an extremely helpful (and short) book that can be read in half an hour or lingered over for longer in order to do full

justice to his approach.

By means of story, metaphor and poetry (rather as Jesus seems to have done) he reflects on a series of themes that make these connections and invites the reader to use their imagination rather than simply affirming intellectual assent. Picture a journey of discovery in the company of a storyteller who invites you to look at what you see in a new way, and you will catch the drift of his stimulating and thoughtful ideas. This is not a complex philosophical or a theological book, though Robin has studied both, but uses language and mind-pictures to talk about deep things in a day-to-day way. Swimming pools, guitar strings, rainbows and keeping fit all crop up. The final chapter is an extended fantasy about a bird and a coconut! The book, at only 50 pages, would be an ideal choice for personal or group use, perhaps during Lent.

Ben Whitney

The Precarious Church by Martyn Percy, Canterbury Press



The precariousness of the CofE is explored suggesting focus on size or survival should be replaced by becoming an open church, faithful to God and each other. It comes with

Foreword, Acknowledgment, Introduction, and Afterword allowing others to comment on the recent events in Percy's life

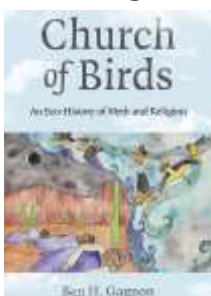
Percy makes a strong critique of the 'Church Growth Movement fetish'. He fears it may damage the organic nature of the church and its grounding in local life, citing plans for 10,000 new lay-led churches by 2030. But there is evidence from beyond our shores that church growth flourishes in the Anglican world. Nigeria and Borneo provide examples of large congregations with house groups ensuring rootedness in loving God and

neighbour. But Percy makes one reference to places in the Anglican communion, where dioceses manage with much less structure. Percy cites the failure of initiatives like Call to the Nation and Decade of Evangelism. 'Every initiative has resulted in greater public distancing and a steeper decline in attendance'. Further 'the senior leadership [is] entirely besotted with gibberish masquerading as visionary'. This he contrasts with the Queen's Christmas broadcasts which 'found the right words to capture, lead and inspire the nation'. Several chapters critique reports, one has 'a fundamental flaw: it does not start with God'. In another report 'the tradition of the church does not recognise the vision' of episcopacy which sees bishops as 'target setters, motivational practitioners, and middle managers'.

There are also valuable suggestions. On impartiality Percy says the church needs to make decisions and cannot please all. He cites Desmond Tutu and others as examples of avoiding neutrality with courage and wisdom. Another positive is that clergy should lead congregations into 'deeper theological learning' and 'the riches of contemplative prayer'. There is concern for survivors of sexual abuse and criticism of a 'safeguarding culture' which 'ensures all power differentials remain in place including secrecy, unsafe and unlawful practices'. Peter Selby's Afterword echoes my response, Percy has 'courage ... to articulate a corrective and present a different vision'.

Peter Varney

Church of Birds by Ben H. Gagnon, Moon Books.



Eco-mythology and eco-history frame the author's hypothesis that birds led humankind 'around the world from one Garden of Eden to another' enabling physical

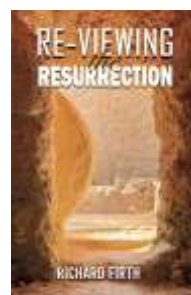
sustenance and inspiring many cultural and spiritual practices. Ben Gagnon, has won awards as a newspaper reporter, editorial writer, documentary filmmaker, long-range city planner, and novelist. This book of non-fiction was triggered by his

curiosity that winter solstice aligned temples are often found in the wintering grounds of migratory bird. In the book he writes of the influence of birds on humankind including the development of speech and music. He traces the spread of humankind against the migratory paths of birds. He argues that birds led to fertile areas, offered an early warning system against danger, and were a source of nutrition. He suggests that the mystery of the bird's patterns of departure and return led to a range of cosmic and cultural beliefs. The book is a compendium of ancient myths and offers insights into the development of rituals and religions. Whilst the book was fascinating, I felt it deserved more exploration than I was able to give. It is not a light read; it is peppered with fascinating theories which are breaking new territory. At times it felt more like an inventory of examples rather than an engaging text. People with an interest in anthropology, mythology and eco-history may find this a valuable intersectional read. However, I feel that it will have a niche audience.

Having shown their key role in global evolution and ecosystems, the book ends with a lament of the decimation of bird populations stating, 'it's not too late to reverse the trends but the clock is ticking.' We must take heed.

Meryl White

Re-Viewing the Resurrection by Richard Firth, self-published member@firthfolk.fsnet.co.uk



The Resurrection is recognised as profoundly significant for Christian faith. Richard Firth seeks to offer a fresh perspective on the subject. He brings to the task

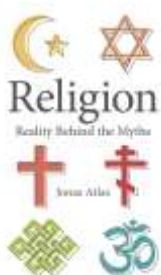
his considerable pastoral experience as a Methodist presbyter as well as extensive scholarly reflection on the relevant biblical and theological material. The book itself is brief, well-argued and is written in colloquial style, as befits a preacher.

There are fifteen short chapters. About half deal with Biblical material. Analysis on the texts is often interspersed with references to present day scientific understanding. Chapter Seven examines what a number of theologians and scholars

have had to say about resurrection. It's an eclectic choice, consisting of the views of some of the giants of twentieth century thought as well as other lesser-known writers, chosen to illustrate the breadth of views possible. Richard is not afraid to point out what he sees as inconsistencies in the thinking of those he mentions, for instance in the cases of Hans Kung and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, despite both having interesting things to say. It is in the other chapters, however, that the author's direction can be best discerned. An early example is to be found in the second chapter 'The Experience of Grief: An Aid to Interpretation.' Here, examples are given of how we share with family and friends recollections of loved ones who have died, of the everyday rituals we re-enact to recall them and of the revisiting of places made significant by their association with the one we have lost. The grief process is used by Richard as a prism through which to shed light on the situation of the first disciples. Later chapters make it clear that Richard's quest is for a faith which is credible in light of modern thought. He rejects the notion of an interventionist God and believes that God works in the world through human agency. He speculates in a creative way on the possible links between Paul's Damascus Road experience, the Resurrection, and the Day of Pentecost.

James Poore

Religion by Jonas Atlas, iff Books



Atlas sets out to bust seven myths or commonly held assumptions about religion. Put briefly: religion equals dogma; religions are structured hierarchically; religions can be

clearly distinguished from one another; spirituality and mysticism contrast with religion; science and religion are at odds; religions are dangerous and a secular society is completely different (and better) than a religious one.

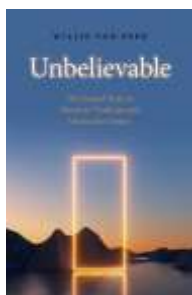
Atlas comes in with counter arguments to what he sees as these modern myths which, he says, have become part of many people's conceptual framework of how things are. Such thinking can only offer a very basic view of religion. His

demolition work begins by way of systematically questioning or attempting to disprove the basic premises on which these assumptions are built. He chips away, deconstructs but also offers insight into how we might develop a new vision of religion.

Atlas is a Belgian scholar and this book which first appeared in Dutch now makes a welcome appearance becoming available to a much wider, English-speaking audience. Taken chapter by chapter it would provide religious discussion groups and the like with plenty of material.

Paul Harrington

Unbelievable by Willie Van Peer, iff Books



This is a based-on sound scholarly research and uses a readable style and clear language. It sheds a penetrating light on how the NT came into being and looks at the

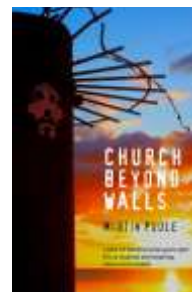
implications of its inconsistencies and contradictions.

It is only possible to pick out a few highlights and no space to describe the detailed, scholarly references, explanations and conclusions given. He speaks of the 'existential differences' between the gospels 'not simply different stories. Here, Jesus is a different Jesus each time.' The differences are delved into and laid bare and in the chapter on Oral Traditions he gives an illuminating exposition on the reality of how stories develop and expand/change during oral transmission and the storyteller/writer's own convictions and intentions. This is backed up by examples of carefully controlled experiments during the last century. Another compelling, and to some maybe disturbing, chapter is that on Jesus' trial and crucifixion. He shows how the story of the trial breaks every rule concerning a Jewish trial. He then describes in horrifying detail what a Roman crucifixion was like, in the preceding flogging, in the actual event and in its aftermath. Forget any image you have from religious art. It was horrific beyond belief. The concluding chapter steps beyond the book's sub-title to compare Jesus' and Paul's Christianity. It is titled 'A Christianity Without Jesus'. The last paragraph opens thus: 'Let me be very clear:

what Paul proclaimed has nothing – absolutely nothing – to do with Jesus message' and continues 'Everything Paul claims is based solely on his own vision...not the living Jesus and what he preached, not even marginally. One can rightly ask: Was Jesus a Christian?'

Fred Pink

Church beyond Walls by Martin Poole, Canterbury Press



"The Church of the twenty-first century and beyond needs to change radically if it is to survive and be at all relevant to modern society."

This is an oft-heard call and one that squarely belongs in

the easier-said-than-done tray. But Anglican priest Martin Poole "throwing off robes and rituals invented centuries ago" is busy going outside the walls of the local church creating new acts of sacred encounter aimed at the public square –where Jesus himself spent much of his time—and this book is packed full of examples of just how to tackle this.

Many readers will have heard of the beach huts along Hove seafront which were turned into a giant Advent calendar over a number of years. The full and fascinating tale of how this was achieved is here but that's just a starting point for a storehouse of practical advice on how to stage community events including walking meditations, spiritual trails, retail spirituality and pub theology. The author's suggestions are all based on his hard-won experience of staging such public events in and around the city of Brighton and Hove.

The author is the founder of a group called "Beyond" a Christian community whose passion is to take Christian spirituality into the public arena. In the conclusion to the book, the author, once a branding consultant, pauses to reflect whether the Church as a brand is now actually an appropriate vehicle for attracting people to faith in God...a whole different debate. Meanwhile, for local churches brave enough to try to create inspiring encounters with the divine outside their own four walls, Martin Poole's book can hardly be bettered.

Paul Harrington

**Love
God**

**Love your
neighbour**

**And know you are
beloved of God**