



Don Cupitt
1934 – 2025

Five Essential Books by Don Cupitt



Taking Leave of God

This was the book which first garnered international celebrity and notoriety for its author and which fire-started a debate about the supernatural claims of Christianity. Rejecting Christian doctrines and metaphysics in favour of the religious consciousness which characterises human identity, Cupitt 'takes leave' of God by abandoning objective theism. Because he remained an ordained priest of the Church of England, the author attracted considerable attention and criticism for his position. Indeed, Keith Ward wrote an entire book - *Holding Fast to God* - which attempted to counter Cupitt's views. Whatever one thinks of the author's beliefs, *Taking Leave of God* contributed to one of the most important theological discussions of its time.



The Sea of Faith

The Sea of Faith made a huge impact when it was first published to accompany a major television series in the mid 1980's. For a generation that was embodying the ebbing of the tide of faith, it articulated the huge intellectual and cultural shifts that had resulted in most people no longer having any connection with official religion.

For many who, whilst still going to church, glimpsed horizons wider than those offered by traditional forms of religious thought, *The Sea of Faith* offered liberating freedom, encouraging them to have minds of their own in matters of faith.

For many more who had abandoned the church, it once again made the wider question a matter of serious and worthwhile concern. Today, the *Sea of Faith* networks exist in Britain, Australia and New Zealand and the movement is known around much of the world. *The Sea of Faith* is rightly acknowledged as one of the most influential theological texts of recent years.



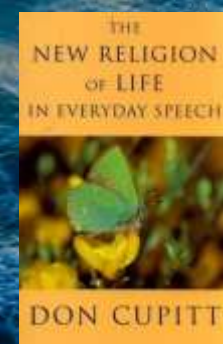
The Long-Legged Fly

Cupitt sees the pond-skater as an image of religious thought in an age of thoroughgoing reductionism. It is light, resourceful, fast-moving and able to survive. It creates a world out of varying vibrations and, Don Cupitt argues, theology must be similarly creative.



Solar Ethics

Don Cupitt's ethics may seem strange and furious; but he says that this is a religious ethic to fit the truth about the world and our own life as we now understand it.



The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech

A strange religious change has taken place during the last few decades, as the word 'God' has disappeared from common speech. Cupitt analyses and interprets new idioms that have recently become established in English.

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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

Alongside our usual mix of contributions we offer reflections on the life of Don Cupitt who recently died. Our thoughts and prayers are with his wife, Susan, and their children and grandchildren.

Also within these pages, our chair, Simon Cross will be opening up a conversation about how PCN Britain spends its money - and part of that is the printing and postage costs for PV to fall through your letterboxes.

Welcome to the 52nd edition of PV.

Enjoy!

PCN Britain's 2025 Annual General Meeting

Sat 17 MAY 2025

Augustine URC in Edinburgh

Richard Holloway will be our speaker.

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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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Chair's Letter

Dear friends, I am sure we were all saddened to hear of the death of Don Cupitt (of whom more later) earlier this year. His ability to challenge the orthodoxies of his time with a wise patience is testament to his character.

Sadly, like many people who have the courage to step outside the theological box that others would have preferred them to remain within, he didn't enjoy the support of the Church. As an institution (whether formally institutionalised or not) Christianity tends to prefer to protect itself than to encourage 'irritants'. There are, I suppose, arguments to be made from both directions over the rightness, or wrongness, of this thinking, but personally I lament the fact that people like Don Cupitt, and other iconoclasts before him, became unwelcome in parts of the Church.



It reminds me that a few years ago the Church of Scotland ecclesiologist Steve Aisthorpe (himself something of an evangelical) wrote a book encouraging the Church, in its widest sense, to 'rewild' itself. At the time 'rewilding' was a popular motif and many column inches were being occupied by people extolling the virtues of reintroducing beavers, lynx, wolves and even bears into habitat from which they had long been removed.

Any truly 'rewilded' habitat would have to be based on an evolving ecosystem which saw the cycle of life and death at its heart – one which was open to the reality of risk and threat. The polar opposite of such a habitat is, I suppose, a monoculture in which a single crop is continuously grown and harvested with the support of copious artificial fertilisers and pesticides.

It feels to me like there are parts of the Church which would very much favour a monoculture approach – no room for deviation from standard norms, whether they are behavioural or doctrinal.

That is, though, not a position I think a 'progressive' person can wholeheartedly support without a



Simon Cross serves as the
Chair of PCN Britain.
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profound sense of cognitive dissonance. It is an inherently 'conservative' approach. Of course, that means we have to reflect back on ourselves. Are we really just interested in creating a different sort of monoculture? Planting barley instead of wheat? Upholding some sort of liberal orthodoxy rather than a conservative one?

Another of our late friends, Marcus Borg showed great wisdom by entering into friendly dialogue with conservative counterparts. He sensed, I think, the need for different voices and perspectives to find a way to share the same space. The temptation for us all, perhaps, is to demand that we create spaces where only 'our' voices are heard, where 'our' views are represented.

Let's work together to create spaces where all voices can be heard, let's not fall foul of the temptation to simply create new exclusive spaces. We owe it to those who have gone before.

Nothing stays the same forever

"Albert Schweitzer was unlucky in living too long." Such was the late Don Cupitt's assessment, anyway, in his groundbreaking 'The Sea of Faith'.

Schweitzer, said Cupitt, suffered the misfortune of enormous popularity which meant that the 'real meaning' of his life and work became obscured by his personal fame. Ultimately, of course, the popularity wore away and Schweitzer moved from popular hero to pariah, his enquiring mind and prodigious achievements deemed old fashioned, out of date, a relic of a former time.

As the son of a Lutheran pastor Schweitzer was brought up in a religious home, but as Cupitt wrote, he had an attitude to religion that was 'uncommon'. He was curious and resistant to the restrictions of dogma, ultimately, he embraced a view of God which presaged Cupitt's own stance, both men consigning to history the traditional sense of deity and choosing to think of the divine in terms of ethical living.

For both of these great thinkers there is clear evidence of the way that their thinking changed – from a position of relative theological conservatism to one far removed from such a position. Things change, times change, circumstances change – so thinking has to change too. Nothing stays the same forever, after all.

When PCN Britain was founded, now more than 20 years ago, we had a clear sense of a desire to provide a home for people who found themselves outside of the mainstream of British Christianity. A place of belonging, and for some 'safety', for those who found themselves on the outside of the church. As a membership network, rather than an 'organisation' PCN Britain would help its members to find fellow travellers and to organise groups – it would provide opportunities for visiting speakers and develop helpful materials for groups and individuals to reflect on.

Our membership subscriptions were set at a level that, we hoped, would allow people to be members without requiring financial sacrifice – for the relatively modest subscription we would organise a management committee and publish a regular 'journal' which would be mailed to members.

As years went by, we managed to develop some small financial reserves, enough to ensure that we were financially viable and that, if anything were to happen, we'd be able to meet our statutory commitments. When our outgoing treasurer Peter Stribblehill presented his first budget, he commented that our money was there to be spent – we all agreed.

As time has gone on, we have spent some of that money, and at the same time we have refrained from asking our members for higher subscriptions – our plan was always to use the money that members had paid in to provide a meaningful service to the network.

As we enter the early years of our third decade of existence, we find ourselves in a new financial position. Rapid economic changes have begun to make life difficult for us – postage costs, printing costs, travel and accommodation costs – all these have jumped quickly, while at the same time we have chosen to keep our subscription figures low. Things change, times change, circumstances change – so thinking has to change too. Nothing stays the same forever, after all.



We find ourselves, now, in a world where some challenging decisions must be made. All around us people have moved, or are moving, away from the costly enterprise of print media. Publishing is increasingly moving online – saving not only the cost of printing but also the price of postage. As we face our own 'cost of living' questions we must ask, now, whether we, too, should take our paper magazine fully into the digital space. Do we value paper copies enough to pay the full price that it costs? (Currently our standard subscription rate just about pays for the preparation, print and postage of the magazine, but doesn't extend beyond that).

At the same time as our finances have started to be chipped away, so has our membership. There's a demographic reality about a network like ours – we are predominantly made up of folk from a particular generation, and no generation lasts forever. While we still get new folk joining the network, each year our membership figure gets slowly, progressively smaller. Things change, times change, circumstances change – so thinking has to change too. Nothing stays the same forever, after all.

Where then, do we go now? How do we deal with the economic and demographic realities that we face? The management committee have already made a move – we now only meet 'online' – swapping our occasional 'in person' meetings for business meetings mediated by internet enabled devices. Is something lost in this move away from face-to-face get-togethers? Almost certainly, but as our circumstances change, so must our behaviours. In any case, we are comforted to know that we are, at least, not driving long distances and burning fossil fuels to do so.

The management committee is made up of members of the network, we're not special people, or even people with special abilities or knowledge. We're members of the network like everyone else – we cannot make the sort of decisions we need to make about the future direction of the network in isolation. We need the help and support of all our members. We will reach out to you to ask for your help by means of online 'consultations' (the first of these will be on the 13th of March) but you don't have to wait to join a Zoom call. Send us your thoughts, your opinions, your ideas. If you're able to, consider volunteering to join the committee too – you could help us chart a course through these present challenges.

Ultimately Albert Schweitzer's thought, wrote Cupitt, "remained in the end incomplete." That is, surely, true of all of us. We are constantly in process, never complete. As we respond to our experience of changing circumstances so our thinking has to alter, nothing stays the same forever, after all.

Remembering Don Cupitt

Don Cupitt, who died on 18th January 2025, was the person who had the most influence on my religious life. I first discovered his writing in the early 1990s when I was starting to explore my faith and beliefs. I was able to immediately relate to his theology of 'non-realism' which answered the questions and doubts that I had been struggling with. At last, I had found someone who understood and had similar ideas to me although far better at articulating them.

I soon became a member of the Sea of Faith Network and an attender of its annual conference where the highlight was always his keynote speech. He had the ability to talk at length about almost anything theological, not with any pride or arrogance, but with a genuine desire to help others and inform their debate.

In his book 'The Sea of Faith' he defined a non-realist God as the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims on us, and their creative power. In a later book 'The Last Testament' he explored two messages from Jesus, the 'solar' and the 'catholic.' They exist side by side in Matthew's sermon on the mount where at 5.13-16 the original 'solar' Jesus tells his followers that they are the salt of the earth and should live expressively. Then at 6.1-21, the catholic Jesus tells them the opposite, giving to charities secretly etc. After his death the catholic teaching won, so that Cupitt quotes Nietzsche as saying that there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross. Cupitt's is an optimistic message that we should find the original Jesus and follow him, not the catholic, priest-led religion which of course requires a hierarchy and power structure.

The highlight of our acquaintance for me came in 2013 when I was preparing my MA dissertation on the value of non-realism in interfaith dialogue. I was able to spend a morning in his study at Emmanuel College overlooking The Green and sharing his thoughts on the subject. I didn't mention that it was my birthday - what a birthday treat for me!

Here are some of my notes from the meeting:

He made some observations about the plurality of faiths. Simply stated, they represent some profound observations about the plurality of religions.

In a typical book about religions, there would be lots of description about the customs and practices of each religion but no reference to the existence of God (taken as a given). In actuality, all religions took a non-realist view of faiths other than their own – the difference with a non-realist was that they would take a similar non-realist view of their own religion in that God had no independent existence 'outside.'

A religion was a culturally-patterned interaction with culturally-postulated supernatural beings. We need to exist outside of religion. When we speak of the dead, they are in the same place as the supernatural beings of religion who belong with the dead.

Many people had an expectation that life would make sense; they needed God to exist, but there was no reason to suppose that it had to "add up." The problem of suffering was tied up with evolution – that happened because things went wrong and genetic mutations occurred. If you said yes to life then it is necessary to accept its hard side.

On the perceived problem in pluralism with "debilitating" relativism, he pointed out that the opposite of relativism is absolutism; which do we prefer? We have to refer to faults where they exist in religions.

My latter recollections of Don were his attendance at 'virtual' SoF conferences, less able physically but still able to sum up and comment on talks immediately after they ended, as mentally acute as ever. We should celebrate a life well spent though sadly under-recognised by the establishment.

Peter Stribblehill

I shall remain forever grateful to Don Cupitt for helping me to feel justified in abandoning theistic, supernatural Christianity and for being able to replace it with a true Christianity based on the practice of love, compassion and forgiveness. I can now see how the Church reversed Jesus' teaching very early on and replaced it with a religion based on power and beliefs. Thank you Don for resurrecting Christianity for me!

Grenville Gilbert

I thought I knew quite a lot about Jesus as I am the daughter of a Methodist Missionary and Missionary Nurse and attended Christian schools in India and England. But when I saw Cupitt's "Who was Jesus?" on TV in 1977 I was so shocked, it changed my life.

I was an experienced public interviewer and so interviewed people living in my town about their knowledge of Christianity. The results dismayed me. I contacted Don and he kindly let me see him in Cambridge. He gave me about an hour of his time although I was of no importance and he answered all my questions simply enough for me to understand. (I had only done A Level Bible Knowledge at school then.)

I've been a member of radical Methodist and Anglican, and inter-church groups like ONE and PCN, since the 1980s.

I believe that unless PCN undertakes a sustainable campaign to hit mass media and rock all church hierarchy for some time, PCN may dwindle into oblivion! I apologise for being so rude when the trustees are trying so hard and members are kind, worthy people, but I'm old enough to have seen many radical Christian groups since that start with enthusiasm but then drift into obscurity.

Alison Beresford

Not for Nothing

Producer of 'The Sea of Faith' talk in Newcastle.

PCN Newcastle is delighted to announce that Peter Armstrong, television and radio producer, including the 6-part series 'The Sea of Faith', will be speaking on Tuesday, 13th May, 2025, 7pm, at Brunswick Methodist Church, off Northumberland Street, Newcastle. NE1 7BJ.

Peter will be speaking about his book, 'Not for Nothing: Searching for a Meaningful Life', first published in 2020 by Christian Alternative Books. Peter Armstrong went straight from a theology degree in Oxford, to working in BBC religious programmes, becoming Head of the television department at the age of 32. His programmes became more radical over the years, from the weekly Everyman international documentaries on BBC1, to The Sea of Faith series with Don Cupitt. This caused so much interest that it led to the creation of the Sea of Faith Network which still meets today 45 years later. Indeed, the BBC has recently rebroadcast the series to mark its 45th anniversary.

But in his latest book, Peter is less radical than Don Cupitt. Peter still calls himself a Christian, but a Christian agnostic. He is a follower of Jesus, rather than a signed-up member of any church that claims Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. Peter believes in God, but he does not claim that there is evidence to claim certain knowledge of the traditional Christian metaphysics. This is the position set out in his recent book, Not for Nothing – searching for a meaningful life. He believes Jesus offers that meaningful life based on love and service, not a blood sacrifice on a cross. And so long as the latter is the message that the Church offers as 'good news', it is no wonder that it is widely rejected and ignored today.

PCN Newcastle was founded 13 years ago for open discussion and attracts people from several denominations and none to their monthly meetings. Admission to the talk costs £8 and tickets can be bought through the PCN website or at the door. Light refreshments are included and will be served from 6.30pm. The venue is in the centre of the city with good rail and bus transport links. All welcome. For more details, contact liztemple51@gmail.com

Pat Fuller



Don Cupitt

'I've had a good innings',
Don once wrote to me.
He always replied to letters
using words generously.

Don was a Lancastrian,
born in Oldham, 1934.
Charterhouse and Trinity Hall
before the light he saw.

The light started to fade;
Emmanuel College 1966.
Don adopted non-realism
in place of magical tricks.

Don despised the musty hypocrisy
the CofE falsely promulgated;
preferred eschatological humanism,
of the type Jesus instigated.

The Church reversed Jesus' teaching,
worshipping his person as divine.
It lost sight of his central message:
love, the religion for all time.

Don saw through the conundrum:
Reality being claimed, also, as real,
whilst creeds have no useful function
in what we experience and feel.

But, Don's solar living provides a solution;
Jesus' ethical teaching is the sure way to go.
Thank you, Don, for sharing your wisdom,
at last, making Christianity intelligibly so.

Grenville Gilbert



Sea of Faith is a network of groups and individuals who share the understanding that religions and religious faith are creations of the

human imagination and explore together the implications of such an understanding for their moral, spiritual, and social values. At its heart is an open, uninhibited conversation. It's how it all began.

<https://www.sofn.uk/>

Follow the Truth



David Arnold is an Anglican layman who before retiring was principal of a sixth form college in Sussex.

‘Follow the Truth, do your utmost to find it, and let it be your guide wheresoever it may lead you.’

Archbishop Randall Davidson, 1914.

I am writing this as an elderly Englishman, who was five when the Second World War began and was baptised, confirmed and went to communion for the first time on successive days when I was fourteen after gradually deciding that I was a Christian. There was no sudden conversion. I simply preferred the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth to the reality of the immediate world around me and to what I understood to be happening in the wider world.

I continued throughout my life as a member of the CofE, above all because I saw it, and still see it, as an institution dedicated to keeping alive the things concerning Jesus, even though, being made up of fallible human beings, it often does it inadequately and even badly. As life went by, I became more and more of the opinion that many clergy pay too much attention to telling their congregations what they should believe and too little to explaining how the teaching of Jesus is relevant today – how we should look at things and how we should behave.

My position is essentially that being a Christian should above all involve trying to live one’s life in the way Jesus commanded, and that what one believes is relatively unimportant. But that does not mean that I regard theology as unimportant. On the contrary, I see it as immensely important that as many Christians as possible should know enough theology, and preferably enough biblical criticism and ecclesiastical history as well, so that they are able to stand up to people who are sure that they are right about things

I have known clergy suggest that, if it had not been for his resurrection and subsequent ascension, Jesus would simply be one more forgotten holy man, whose teaching was no more remarkable than that of many others. I believe that they are seriously wrong. Jesus’s teaching was revolutionary in its own time, and it still has the power to transform the lives of people who encounter it.

It was not until I went to university in 1954 that I really became aware of Christians of other traditions than the CofE. I met both Roman Catholics and Protestant evangelicals, found that I could talk with Roman Catholics and find where we agreed and where we differed, but found it more difficult to talk with evangelicals, who often adopted a literal interpretation of the Bible, without apparently always having understood what they had read, and were

inclined to avoid discussion with anyone like me who had not experienced a Pauline conversion. They would go away and pray for me.

My own subject was history, but I was interested in theology and philosophy and tried to follow the Way and seek the Truth and the Life represented by Jesus. I valued the guidance of the Church on both faith and morals, and at the same time valued even more the fact that it was possible to disagree. I valued the Old Testament as a collection of Hebrew writings which give an account of how ideas about God developed, and the New Testament for what it tells us about Jesus of Nazareth and about the ideas and way of looking at things which he taught.

I then became a schoolmaster and for many years my main concerns were my wife and children and the teaching of History. But much of my teaching involved Christianity. One could hardly teach The Crusades as an A level special subject without knowing something of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity — and Sunni and Shi’ite Islam as well. Similarly, it was necessary when teaching The Age of Cromwell to have some understanding of Calvinism and of Arminianism. The short-lived double A level, History with Foreign Texts, introduced me to the theological ideas of Anselm of Aosta, and even modern A level special subjects, such as The French Revolution and The Russian Revolutions required an understanding of why revolutionaries saw not only the monarchy but also the Church as something they needed to overthrow.

Wherever I have lived, I have for the last eighty years always attended my local parish church, and in the later years of the twentieth century the then Vicar of Horsham, Derek Tansill, bearing in mind the point in the twelfth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans about people having different gifts, got me to teach a number of courses on Church History. That culminated when I retired in 1999 at the age of 65 in getting me to teach a course throughout the following year on the history of the Church, with a lecture once a fortnight for twenty-five weeks.

That eventually turned into a book called *In the Context of Eternity*, which was published first in England and then, a couple of years later, in America. It challenged the widespread view that ancient history came to an end in the fifth century and that then nothing of significance happened until the Renaissance. I tried to show how during the Middle Ages, the thousand years between the ancient and modern worlds, the intermingling of Christianity and Barbarism on the ruins of the Roman Empire eventually produced the scientific and technological revolutions, capitalism and liberal

democracy, all co-existing with the Christian church. It involved explaining how the Christian church interacted with and was influenced by political developments, and it was deliberately not partisan — not even obviously ‘progressive’.

A Roman Catholic canon lawyer and Provost of the House of Canons of the Archdiocese of Westminster described it as ‘a delight, a tour de force’, and said he wished he had a copy as a young seminarian. The Lutheran Professor of Theology at the University of Helsinki wrote, ‘I will make use of it in my lectures, because the way the faith developed is not always sufficiently understood by many theologians and priests.’ The Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford described it as ‘always clear, sympathetic, informative and fair-minded’.

In that book the way the development of the Church was influenced by political developments is the core, but inevitably theological ideas intrude. It led eventually to another book, this time on the development of Christian Thinking through the Ages. In this case it is Christian thinking and theological ideas which are the core of the book, though of course political developments intrude. After all, everything is connected.

The book takes the reader on a journey through 2,000 years of ideas. It starts with Jesus of Nazareth’s teaching, looks at speculation about Jesus himself and his significance, and describes the attempts to establish uniformity of belief both in the Roman Empire and in the late Middle Ages. It describes the thinking of medieval monks, schoolmen and friars, of the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment, and goes on to show how the twentieth century’s political horrors led to new theological ideas, most of which have yet to trickle down to most Christians. A personal prologue describes my journey and is followed by twelve chapters:

1. Jesus of Nazareth
2. Four Apostles: Paul, James, Peter and John
3. The Early Fathers of the Church
4. The Seven Ecumenical Councils in the East
5. The West and Augustine of Hippo
6. Benedict, Anselm and Peter Abelard
7. Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham and John Wyclif
8. Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther
9. Calvinism, Methodism and the Great Awakening
10. The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment
11. Theology in the Twentieth Century
12. Into the Third Millennium

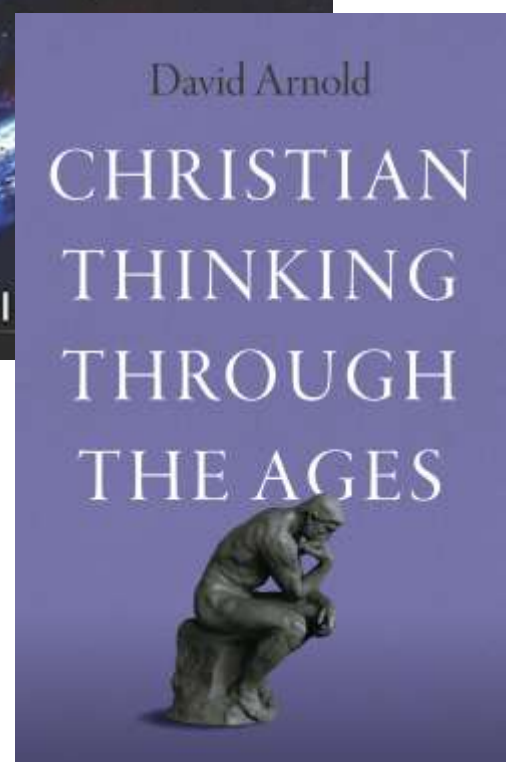
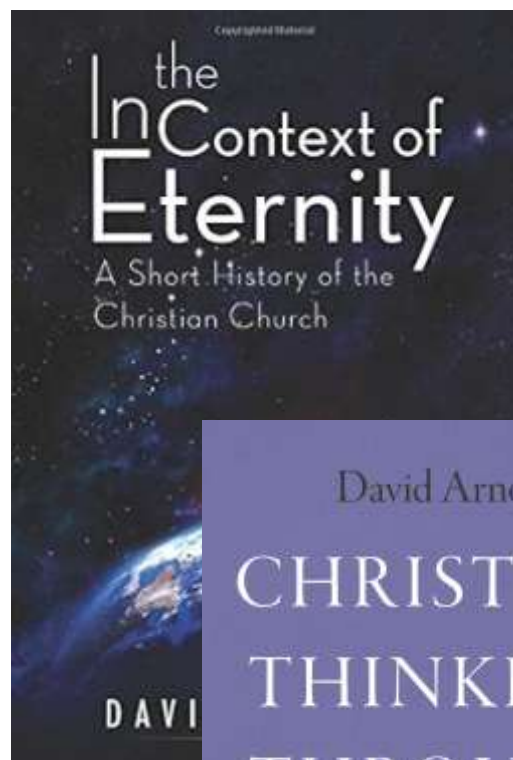
Concluding with an explanation of the various ways churches disagree with each other, it nevertheless ends on the hopeful note. It suggests that what

Christians have in common and can share is something which is the essence of Christianity and has been beautifully summarised in a simple iambic pentameter: ‘the words of Jesus and his sacrifice’.

Lord Chartres, the former bishop of London, and Michael Turnbull, the former bishop of Durham, have both read it before it is due to be published in both the UK and the USA by Christian Alternative Books on 12th December 2024. Richard Chartres has described it as ‘a lucid account of theological trends and controversies over the centuries’.

Michael Turnbull wrote that ‘the real excitement of reading Christian Thinking through the Ages comes from discovering that it is not what you expected... Arnold writes in such an easy and personal way that the reader becomes aware of being invited on a pilgrimage, where the journey is more important than the destination.’

It is dedicated to ‘the many Christians who regularly attend church or chapel but are unsure about what they really believe, to those who think of themselves as agnostic Christians, those who think of themselves as Christians in exile, and those of any faith or none who have realized that it is better to go on seeking truth rather than imagining that they have found it.’



What do I believe now?

Early years

I was born and brought up in the Northwest of England, in a small industrial town, Leigh, in Lancashire. Nearly all of my immediate family were heavily involved with the Salvation Army and other evangelical churches. My upbringing exposed me to what might be termed fundamentalist theology.

However, it also gave me a good grounding in the Bible, for which I am grateful. I had a fairly evangelical outlook myself, but I don't recall that it was as extreme and literal as others that I knew.

Perhaps this was because I was starting to have questions as a result of my education.

Looking back, I seem to have been the odd one out in my family. I was somewhat precocious, learning to read before I went to school. Then, when I was at primary school, I read my way through the infants' library and asked if I could use the junior library, a request which was granted after I was asked to read to the headmaster. No-one in my extended family had been to grammar school, never mind university, so I was the first to do both. From a very early age, I had an interest in history, especially ancient history, and also related topics such as the Greek and Norse myths (suitably sanitised for children!)

I went on to Leigh Boys' Grammar School where I did well academically, although not to the same extent as at primary. The Grammar School was somewhat rough which did not suit me, and I was also bullied. I maintained my interests in the past but, because of something of a disenchantment with the kind of history I was being taught (mainly to do with politics and battles) I decided to apply to study archaeology at university. I thought it might be more wide-ranging, taking in ordinary people as well as the elites. I was accepted by Durham, which was my first choice, partly because of my liking for the stories of the Northumbrian Saints, and partly the impression that the small, beautiful city made on me at interview, especially the cathedral.

After a relatively narrow upbringing, my time at Durham expanded my horizons, as well as introducing me to a wide range of thought on various subjects, not just archaeology. I met people from different backgrounds which were new to me, notably from public schools.

My studies showed me the great depth and range of the human story, as uncovered by archaeology. This was such a contrast to the literal reading of the biblical account that I had originally been exposed to. My degree included much study of British and European prehistory, and it was clear that the human past reached back many thousands of



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years. I found myself asking where and when, if at all, Adam and Eve and the Fall could be fitted in. However, on a more personal note, my time at Durham was not very happy at times, especially during my final year when I suffered a rock-climbing accident. This necessitated my having to delay returning to Durham until the next academic year, by when nearly all my friends had left.

Career

After a year's archaeological work in Manchester, and some unemployment, I won a grant for a place on a post-graduate course based on four placements in a year working on projects at archaeological organisations. The aim was to give participants the kind of practical skills that had not been provided at university. Moving around the country meant that I worshipped at various types of church, including the very large Anglican church, All Souls Langham Place in London. The course worked and I was successful in getting a job with Essex County Council, initially on temporary contracts, renewed annually, but after a promotion this turned into a permanent contract. Overall, my career was very rewarding and involved a lot of interesting projects including, towards the end, European-funded work. I also met and married Ruth and attended a moderate Anglican church, All Saints Rayne. During my time there I was church warden for a five-year spell and, during an vacancy, I had to lead services when we were unable to find a minister. Also, with Ruth, I did the Chelmsford Course in Christian Studies, which introduced me to some different approaches to understanding the various books of the Bible and how they came to be written. Ruth was a member of the Othona Community which is a very inclusive and broad-minded organisation. We went to quite a few weeks there, mainly at the Dorset centre, and I met many liberal-minded people, including ministers. The talks and atmosphere confirmed me in the liberal direction I had already been heading in.

Coming up-to-date

I worked for the County Council from 1984 until 2016 when I took up the offer of early retirement. A few years ago, we felt that we ought to move to worship at the ecumenical church that was developing on our estate at Great Notley. We were happy with the churchmanship there for a while as it covered several denominations and was quite 'broad church'. More recently, however, it has taken a more fundamentalist stance, as a result of which we don't go so often, and we are asking what we should be doing in the future. PCN provides a welcome counterbalance!

Questions, questions, questions ...

Christianity has been a powerful presence throughout my life. My beliefs have changed from a more-or-less evangelical faith to liberalism. This as a result of reflection based on my experience and on my reading into topics. I would characterise myself as a Christian agnostic, perhaps even a Christian atheist. However, the figure of Jesus is still important to me, and I feel the need to attend some kind of service, especially the need to meet with other Christians. I also respect and value the role of religion to provide meaning in life and a story to live by. I would characterise my approach as like the Sea of Faith and, especially, Richard Holloway whose books I have much enjoyed. What has caused the changes? I suggest the following reasons, which could form topics for discussion:

The widespread presence of evil and suffering in the world. As well as being aware of this in modern times, my reading of history has shown that this goes back many thousands of years. Much of the human past is so horrific (including the violence perpetrated by Christians on fellow Christians) and it does not seem to be getting any better, rather it is getting worse. I find it impossible to believe in the interventionist God that I was taught about in my early years. Is there really a father-figure choosing to intervene or not according to particular whims?

The authority of the Bible. For a long time, I have been conscious of the inconsistencies and errors that are clearly present in the scriptures. Clearly, there are differing views amongst scholars, and new discoveries are made from time to time that result in the abandonment of some theories. However, it is obvious to me that there are major problems with some key events for which there is limited or no evidence, for example the Exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land, and the united monarchy of David and Solomon. As a result, I have come to the view of the Bible as a human creation.

Making sense of the wider human story. Looked at in its geographical and historical context, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were relatively small and existed for only a few hundred years. How are we to fit their story into the much larger and broader stream of events in human history. For example, in Britain and Western Europe, from about 4,000 to 2,000 BCE people were creating huge stone monuments such as Stonehenge (in England), Carnac (in France) and Newgrange (in Ireland). Further back in time, beautiful cave paintings were made in the Old Stone Age, and both Homo Sapiens and Neanderthals seem to have commemorated their dead. Then there is the great range of religious experience across the whole world, also going back many years. The idea that God ignored much of the world for nearly all the human past, choosing instead to speak through the relatively few inhabitants of one tiny area, seems to me to be absurd and unbelievable.



Jesus. It is customary for theologians to distinguish between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith. I have come across various books claiming to present the 'true' Jesus as he really was, and they continue to be written (for a fairly straightforward and balanced account I would recommend 'The Historical Figure of Jesus' by E.P. Sanders). However, the more I consider the Gospels, and the similarities and differences between them, I have reached the following conclusions:

- a. The early Christians understood Jesus and his message through the prism of the Hebrew Scriptures and this understanding is also shared by the Gospel writers. For example, Mark presents Jesus as the Suffering Servant and his account of the crucifixion is framed by Psalm 22. As a result of the use of such earlier writings as prophesying the events in Jesus' life, it is difficult if not impossible to decide how much is literally true and how much is being used symbolically. What was there about the life of Jesus that prompted the followers to make such extraordinary claims about him? Why was he considered so dangerous that the authorities of the day had to put him to death in such a violent and horrible fashion? However, it was not the end. As they moved on from his death, his first followers seem to have felt his Spirit with them in some new and special way.
- b. It is very clear to me that Jesus, and his followers, believed that God would act soon to establish the Kingdom. When this happened, such expectations had to be revised, as has happened many times since when expectations of the Second Coming proved illusory.
- c. As I no longer believe in the supernatural and miraculous events, I have come to regard their inclusion in the Gospels in a symbolic way and to prefer to consider the teaching of Jesus. The Kingdom may not be a literal reign of God, but I still regard the example and the loving message of Jesus as the best way forward for the human race. As I mentioned above, this is the story I still revere and try to live by. Jesus' first followers seem to have had difficulty in fitting him into their established world view but, despite their attempts to limit him, I believe his message can still break through to challenge us.

Simple, Generous, Open

In the winter of 2016, on a long and stormy drive home to Coventry, an idea took hold. We were going to start a new worshipping community. (Me and my partner, the Rev Naomi Nixon, CEO of the Student Christian Movement). We'd begun to sense God calling us to do something new for a while, but weren't sure what. What, it turns out, was to start an unashamedly progressive and inclusive church in the central tradition of the CofE, which would reach out to those people we were missing or failing to keep hold of, in conventional parish ministry. The next day we put the idea to the Archdeacon.

The following summer, St Clare's at the Cathedral was launched. Seven years later, it's a self-sustaining, thriving community and shop, based at Coventry Cathedral, and resourcing churches all over the country and beyond.

'Simple, Generous, Open' tells the story of St Clare's. The story of how we came to be and how we continue to flourish, even as we have seen other fresh expressions come and go. We wanted to capture the story for members of the community, especially as time passes, memories fade, and people come and go. We also hoped that others could learn from our experience or be inspired.

The book is structured around our three values: Simple, Generous, Open. Everything we do is guided and underpinned by these values. This enables us to have a clear focus, and helps us to resist distractions from the many competing agendas and demands on our time that are prevalent in the wider church.

In a time when it is all too easy to feel despondent, maybe even despairing about the CofE, we hope that ours is a story that will offer a glimmer of hope. Its aim is not to instruct or provide answers, but to encourage and inspire. It's a reminder that the kingdom of God can be found in places sometimes overlooked by institutions and mission statistics. In the small and uncertain, in the gathering of people bravely continuing to worship when the church has rejected them, in conversations with strangers in a gift shop, and above all else, in the faithful following of God's call.

An extract from 'Simple, Generous, Open'

One morning, I was in St Clare's, talking to a clergy friend who comes in for a chat over a coffee every so often, when a tall, white, older man came into the shop and spent a bit of time looking at the books. He then walked over to us, and with-out preamble decreed that these days he had atheistic leanings, because he was tired of the church and the way it was going. I sighed inwardly, it's sadly something



Charlotte Gale is an Anglican priest and co-leader of the St Clare's Community in Coventry.

I've heard before. People leaving the church because they can no longer cope with attitudes that seem to exclude rather than welcome people, that judge people rather than loving them.

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that ...', I ventured, before the man loudly continued.

'Yes, the church these days is just too "woke". I mean, what's this nonsense about using the word "humankind" when "man-kind" is a perfectly good word, and everyone knows that man means all people ...?'

He had more to say, but you get the general gist.

My friend (a white man himself) tried gently to suggest that maybe being 'woke' wasn't about him, and maybe other people found the word 'man', meaning all people, to be difficult. I was simply smiling through gritted teeth, wishing I was wearing a Smash the Patriarchy t-shirt.

Our visitor was having none of it. He laughingly decreed that he liked to be provocative, and if people didn't like him, so be it. I, for one, I'll be honest, did not warm to him. From his place of privilege, I don't think this man had ever stopped to consider whether being provocative wasn't just an intellectual thing for the people he provoked, but actually caused them harm, caused them to feel lesser. He didn't seem remotely interested in how his views might make other people feel.

Simple,
Generous,
Open



Mission and renewal in
the progressive church

CHARLOTTE GALE

During the summer of 2022, we had a sermon series called 'Included', where we consciously chose to hear stories about how church has not always been a safe or welcoming place because of other people's views and attitudes. I was so incredibly moved that members of St Clare's courageously shared their stories about neurodiversity, disability, mental health and poverty, just four of a long list of things that can deliberately or inadvertently lead to people feeling excluded.



On our initial list of topics that we might have looked at, we also had gender, race and sexuality, issues that sadly continue to cause contention and argument in the church, at the expense of the well-being of real people.

When we say you're welcome at St Clare's, we mean it. You are welcome if you are male or female, if you are cis, trans or non-binary, if you are young, old or middle-aged, if you are gay, straight, bisexual or queer, if you feel tickety-boo, or if you're teetering on the edge of the abyss of depression, anxiety or any other mental illness, suffer with any other kind of illness or experience disability. You are welcome if you are neurotypical or neurodiverse; you are welcome if you are rich or poor, if you went to Eton or live on the streets. Whatever colour or nationality you are, whether you're an ardent believer or are just wanting somewhere to belong, you are welcome. And over the last seven years, I think we have had members who have been one or more of all those things

Jesus tells us to stay awake. Awake, so we can be alert to injustice and oppression, to the things that exclude or imprison people, that stop them being all that God, who loves and created them, intends them to be. That for me is what it means to be 'woke', and that is what it means to be awake to Christ.

I want to be alert to when racism, sexism, poverty, sexuality, mental illness, disability, neurodiversity or anything else, makes people feel that they are lesser. And I especially want to be alert to when that is happening in the church, which should be the place, above all others, where all God's children are valued, loved and welcomed, just as we are.

Sadly, this commitment to inclusivity has not always made us popular. In 2019 we were so excited when the chair of the Coventry Pride committee approached us and asked if we would like to host a service for Christians attending the Pride festival.

We were thrilled to be asked but said that we would first need to check with the Bishop. This we did, and after considerable thought on his part and a long conversation with me and subject to various conditions (such as no flags!), he agreed.

We carefully put together a service which completely abided by the canons and doctrine of the Church of England, as well as fulfilling a few extra stipulations of the Bishop. Despite all this, when a very conservative staff member in the Diocesan Office heard about the upcoming service, he went to the chair of the Diocesan Evangelical Group, who wrote a letter of complaint to the Bishop, signed by all their members. These members included people we thought of as friends. People we had entertained in our home, people who we had prayed with, laughed and cried with. Not one of them thought to reach out and ask us about the service, or even let us know they were signing the letter. It was heartbreaking. My belief that the Church of England really could continue to be a beautiful wide-armed body, embracing a rich diversity of traditions and understandings of Scripture, began to crumble.

The irony is that, up until that moment, we had been pretty low key about our LGBTQ+ welcome. That changed. If a service that had been so carefully considered, that was so Church of England, and that had been approved by a very conservative bishop, still provoked a complaint, then we knew it was time to be more loud and proud, so that those in the LGBTQ+ community would know that we were a safe place for them in the city.

In the end, the service was wonderful, but it caused us huge anxiety. We were genuinely concerned that we might get protestors, and clergy friends came and offered to act as bouncers. No one did come and protest, and our rainbow bunting gloriously proclaimed that all were welcome. Because bunting isn't flags, right?

Paul and Jesus' Resurrection



Harry Houldsworth is a retired lecturer, a lay member of the CofE and lives in Nottingham and Wetwang, Yorkshire.

How did the earliest Christians understand the 'Resurrection'? Did they really see it as Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead, or was it, as some modern commentators suggest, some sort of spiritual re-birth evoked with poetic imagery? Or was it as Greek philosophers may have understood it: a case of the physical body dying and decaying, and the soul (the eternal spirit) leaving the body and continuing to exist in some new way?

What did Paul believe? In 1 Corinthians 15: 51,52, Paul writes of a 'resurrection body', which is spiritual and is changed in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. Perhaps, even Paul wasn't sure what will generally happen? Paul didn't have any doubts on the matter of there being an initial physical resurrection of Jesus, but it is unlikely that his views on this subject developed with, or after, his experience on the road to Damascus.

Did Paul, Saul before the Damascus Road, have a sense that the first Christians were right, in believing in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? Which may have been born when he witnessed the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem, and apparently 'approved' of it. (Acts:7) How long Saul spent persecuting followers of Jesus is difficult to assess, but it was long enough for early Christians to know and fear his name. He sought them out, arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated them, with all the energy and sincerity that he was to show as Paul, in his later missionary journeys, and in his willingness to suffer and to die to promote the Christian faith.

After interrogating these first 'believers in the Way', Saul was hearing the same assertions, time and time again. He could have become an expert on everything that these people knew and thought about Jesus. Did what he learned disturb him?

Saul was a Pharisee, and he discovered that these new believers in Jesus (who were first called 'Christians' in Antioch) had many beliefs that were like his own: that after death there will be judgment and only the 'elect' will be saved from hell. By contrast, the Sadducees who ran the Temple rejected the very idea of an eternal life. (Acts, 23:8)

The arguments Saul was hearing about Jesus' life and death being prophesied in Jewish Scripture were arguments that he could check and approve of, but he seems not to have heard about the idea of Jesus' mother being a virgin. Or, if he had, he firmly rejected the idea. He declared clearly that Jesus was 'born of a woman, under the Law'. (Galatians 4:4) Was Paul worried that a virgin birth destroyed the blood-link to the 'House of David'?

Saul may have suffered great stress while he continued to reject the unthinkable – that the early Christians were right, and he was wrong.

After his nervous breakdown on the road to Damascus, Saul reported that God/Jesus spoke to him in his dreams, but I think there is little doubt that long before this he had come to accept that the evidence was totally reliable: Jesus had been raised from the dead, and he had spoken with women and to his apostles in the days following his crucifixion, until he 'ascended' into heaven before witnesses.

Saul's thinking about Jesus' birth and of his human life as a prophet, a healer, and as a teacher, gave him ideas about Jesus' divinity. Whether divine or not, Paul seems to have believed that Jesus was 'perfect' in life. However, in Paul's mind, and in the mind of thousands of early Christians, Jesus' resurrection from the dead proved to them that life continues beyond the grave. They also had confidence that Jesus would return from heaven, in their lifetimes, to inaugurate the 'Kingdom of God' and 'Final Judgment' This, of course, didn't happen.

As indicated above, not all Jews at the time of Jesus believed in a life after death and a Last Judgment. It is unlikely that Moses believed in life after death and Sadducees were of the same opinion. The ideas came from Persia in the years after the Babylonian captivity, when the Persian King Cyrus encouraged the Jews to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem. What is interesting is that Sadducees and Pharisees seemed to get along with one another despite Pharisees' beliefs being a direct challenge to some ancient Hebrew Scripture.

Paul does not seem to have seen any conflict between Jesus' teaching and 'Old Testament' ideas. He appears to have decided that Jesus' death was necessary to pay for the sins of Adam and Eve (in a real Garden of Eden) and that this was also predicted in Jewish Scripture. This is clearly Pauline 'post-Jesus' theology.

The crucial question is: can we in the twenty-first century fully accept Paul's convictions that Jesus was resurrected on the third day after his death on the Cross? A great deal of scientific knowledge is now at our disposal that was not available to Paul or to early Christians.

In 1963, John Robinson (Honest to God) proposed that Christians need to revise their theology about what happens after death and concentrate on the task of building a better and more peaceful society, here and now, on earth.

I suggest that John Robinson was right.

Embracing the unknown

I know I said I'd had my final song, but perhaps I might be permitted a modest encore! Surprisingly I find myself willing, even keen, to be part of the life of my local cathedral again – I have been going there on and off for over 40 years. The atmosphere is calm, the music divine, the preaching thoughtful and the welcome genuine. I still don't say the Creed but no-one is checking to see if my lips are moving. On Advent Sunday evening over 700 people packed the place out for an atmospheric journey from darkness to light, literally and metaphorically. Words of hope, timeless chants, some so ethereal and barely audible from a distant corner of the magnificent building. You could hear a pin drop. 'God' is indeed a mystery.

Of course, it's hardly typical of the CofE as a whole and there are many questions about wealth and power to be aware of – I get that. But at this time of such crisis for the Church, I find myself drawn to a place that speaks to my inner-self and raises my sense of the aesthetic and the unknowable. For those not looking for bland reassurance that we are right and our souls are safe, I wonder if we would be better to drop the word 'worship', which implies a demanding 'Other', and think more in terms of acting out a drama; a story to be told and a timeless vision to be shared.

That must have been how it was before all these parish churches were built as an attempt in a different age to do everything everywhere. That is clearly no longer sustainable. A few desultory hymns in a cold draughty building, or an enthusiastic singalong in one that looks more like a bingo hall, (God All-matey!), will only ever attract a tiny minority. Professional theatre, well-done and worth passing a few churches for, even at the expense of letting them die and finding other ways to maintain a local Christian presence, might be a better model. Less could be more.

Of course, our theology has to change too. More questions than answers. The day before the Advent service I had been to see the film of Robert Harris' 'Conclave' about the election of a fictional Pope. The Dean organising the election, expertly played by Ralph Fiennes and keen to do the right thing, resists the pressure from all sides and speaks in troubled tones about the meaning of faith, of which certainty, not doubt, is the opposite. The older I get the less I know for sure but perhaps, again, less is more. It's the journey that matters, not a detailed knowledge of the alleged destination.

I find myself slowing down somewhat in my seventies, not entirely willingly. I have a non-aggressive prostate cancer – the consultant



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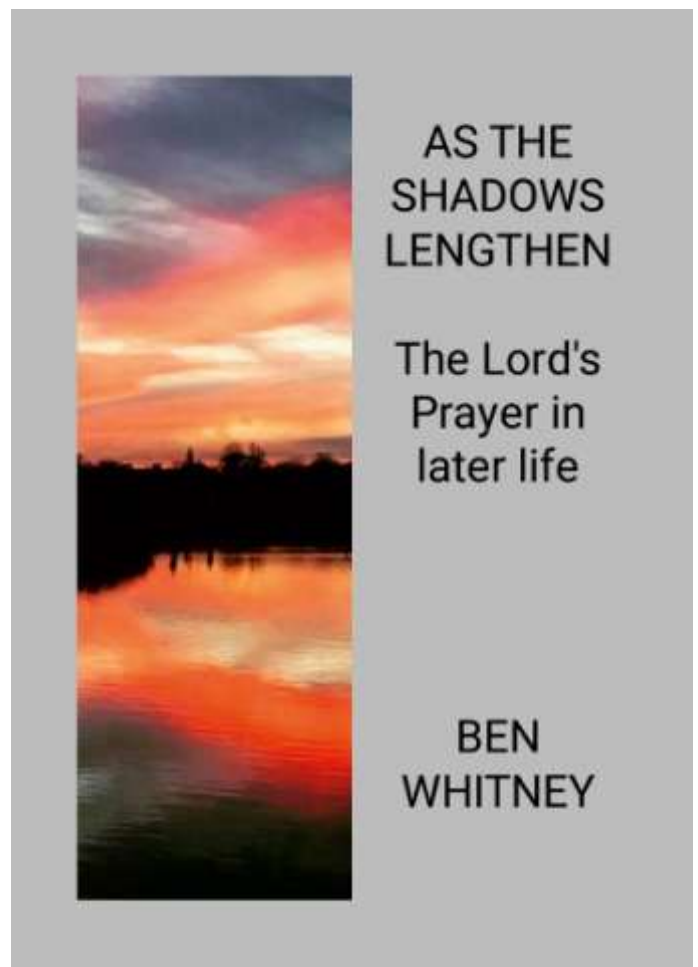
cheerfully told me that I will die of something else! Other bits don't work as well as they did. My memory is flawed and on some days, it is enough to mirror Winnie the Pooh: 'Sometimes I sits and thinks; sometimes I just sits'. Our story only ever has one ending.

My wife and I don't pray together – she's much better at that kind of thing than I am – but at the end of the day we sometimes recite a version of the prayer of John Henry Newman:

O Lord support us all the day long of this troublous life,
Until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,
the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over,
and our work done.

Then Lord, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging,
a holy rest, and peace at the last.

Richard Rohr in 'Falling Upward' writes of embracing the shadows. That is surely enough to hope for this side of the unknown future.



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You have control

To anyone who has ever done any flying training, the above words will probably be very familiar, along with the corollary “I have control”. There was a story (and that is all it may be) about a flying instructor congratulating his pupil on his landing only to be chided by his pupil for being so boastful. The implications were that each thought the other was in control and that a well-trimmed aircraft could land itself, if the conditions were right. I once heard a talk by the crew of an airliner which was involved in an incident involving a catastrophic bird-strike, wherein the Captain immediately took over control from his co-pilot announcing “I have control” to which the co-pilot responded accordingly, presumably with the words “you have control”, in a tone implying “and you’re welcome to it”.

Some aircraft achieve extreme maneuverability by being so unstable as to be uncontrollable by human inputs linked directly to the control surfaces. An electronic control system has to be employed to determine how the control surfaces should be moved, albeit in response to human inputs representative of a desired outcome.

In light of these anecdotes, one might conclude that we do not always have the degree of control we might assume or desire. Indeed, aviation can present pilots with circumstances in which their level of training or experience is insufficient for them to cope. So how might this play out in everyday life?

I am sure I am not alone in having found (at least on occasions) a loving, parent-like presence deep within, capable of offering guidance and comfort during challenging times and to whom control of a situation may be offered, when personal capabilities seem inadequate. In my case it is not a question of control being wrenched away and retained, but of it being assumed until a crisis has passed, and then returned. Being able to make mistakes and learn from them, within the bounds of inner survival, is beneficial to learning about ourselves, our interactions with those around us and the environment in which we live. Sometimes the inner presence seems to say, “I have control”, while at other times an awareness of my own inadequacy prompts me to say “you have control” and to let go. It seldom seems to be too long before the same presence announces “you have control” which enables me to apply whatever teaching I may have received during a temporary crisis. While I sometimes doubt whether my inner mentor will always prevent a catastrophe, my perception is that they have not let me down yet, and perhaps learning to overcome doubts is all part of the training course.



Chris Vosper is a retired Senior Patent Examiner (mainly in aerospace), a Methodist, and is married with grandchildren.

It is not unreasonable, perhaps, to question how such an inner perception is generated. Some may argue that it is merely a psychological trick that human brains perform given the right external stimuli. Others may argue that childhood (and later) conditioning influences are involved. Still others may leap upon quantum physics to explain some inner human experiences. It has been suggested, for example, that quantum entanglement and quantum superposition may play a part in human consciousness (or at least in understanding it). For some, quantum entanglement, in which the state of one quantum particle is linked to that of another particle, even if the particles in question are separated by a vast distance, might suggest the possibility of a link between human beings on earth (who have bodies made up of billions of quantum particles - albeit a limited range of particle types) and other seemingly distant influences, (although a proper understanding of exactly what quantum entanglement means is required, and quantum physics does not appear to allow data to be transmitted by entanglement). Suggestions have also been made that the universe may function like a giant quantum computer, of which, presumably, human beings are constituent parts and perhaps subject to interactions capable of generating a myriad of experiences, deep and otherwise. A combination of factors could, of course, be considered to be involved. Alternatively, it may be tempting to suggest that the inner presence human beings are capable of sensing is “God” working within them. This pre-supposes agreement on exactly what the term “God” is intended to mean, in a modern context. Nevertheless, the presence of a loving, forgiving, person-like influence, to whom inner prayers can be addressed, seems very real at times, and a loving parent, deep within, can seem much more immediate and accessible than some poorly understood and described entity or influence “out there” (whatever “out there” is understood to mean). There is also a sense sometimes that external factors have changed in accordance with an inner exchange with the sensed inner presence. The perceived cause and effect explanation could be open to debate, of course, and the human propensity towards imagination and self-delusion should not be discounted nor unjustifiably assumed.

It seems to me that human understanding, individual and collective, is in a constant state of uncertainty, and subject to a degree of subjectivity - if only because of the individuality seemingly present in human brains. At any one point in time it seems reasonable to adopt understandings which appear consistent with the evidence currently

available. Whether absolute / universal truth exists is open to debate, but I would question whether human beings have the ability to recognise such a truth, assuming it does exist, let alone somehow accommodate it. Currently, it seems the possibility always exists for human beings to uncover or be presented with evidence that is capable of causing them to change their minds and/or modify their understandings. It also would seem potentially dangerous to assume that any human being is all-knowing or capable of being so, given the implied authority and power implicit in such an assumption and the all-too-evident fallibility exhibited by human beings at large in the world today.

To my mind, the Christian narrative(s) provide a focus whereby human beings can tune in to that loving presence within and value the potential for that presence in others. I am in no position (without seeming arrogant) to assert that Christianity is the only focus available for this purpose. Nor can I deny the human potential to tune into alternative, less benevolent forms of inner experience.

Human experience, at whatever depth it is perceived, is likely to be open to a range of possible explanations, and which are adopted are unlikely ever to be divorced from evidential argument. Does this matter? I would argue that the value of the perceived presence of a loving, guiding and forgiving parent-like influence, deep within the human psyche, is not dependent upon being able to understand how it is generated. The benefits such a presence bestows (both on the individual and those with whom they engage) will persist, irrespective of how the individual chooses to perceive its origins, and sometimes an open mind works best. The human-survival value of a human heart is not dependent upon whether or not an owner perceives it as a biological pump. A trainee pilot can appreciate the value of a good instructor without having to know every detail of the instructor's life-history. An on-going relationship of trust is the key, not a potentially transient way of understanding.

It seems difficult at times to separate "belief" from "understanding" but insofar as it relates to a conviction that something is "true", and insofar as "truth" is perceived as something that is absolute, there is no objective way, based on human understanding, that truth can be verified. This suggests to me that there is no way of proving that one view of truth is more valid than any other. A desire for ultimate understanding or absolute knowledge, as opposed to a desire for understandings that simply enable humans to be "better", (in a sense revealed by an inner presence, perhaps) to engage with their environment and the other life-forms within it) can be seen as a desire for ultimate power and control, which may inhibit the facility to say to a sensed inner presence, when appropriate, "you have control".

Clacton Cathedral

I think we got away with it!
at least no one called the police,
on that bright and sunny day,
when we did it on the beach.

Our Chalice was a plastic cup,
our Bread was wrapped in foil.
the wine was poured, and no one saw
or knew what it was for.

No walls there were to keep it in,
no boundary to keep it out,
from here to the far horizon
where Sea and Sky do meet.

The Sea is always full of dreams
of journeys yet to make.
From the Land I look up to see
the Sky Above - that's heavens gate.

Onlookers would never know,
that on this tiny strip of sand,
a church is being built
that belongs not to the Sea,
and yet, not to the Land.

Out on the far horizon,
where Sea and Sky do meet,
seven rows of seraphims
will guard this great cathedral.

We must get back to the sensory garden
until next time let's say goodbye.
Follow the long straight road ahead
and leave the Sea and Land and Sky.

But if we wish and choose again
and listen quietly we may hear,
the answer to the question
no-one asks...

"where is Clacton Cathedral?"

Tom Lloyd

Imagined teachings of Jesus

The crucifixion

"And what of your words, Jesus of Nazareth?" asked Pilate. "For it is your words that have brought you here and it is your words that will determine your fate."

"My words are good" replied Jesus, "because they are not mine. I speak only what I am shown from above."

"What is goodness?" asked Pilate, sceptically. Jesus walked over to one of the bookcases that reached up high. He took a volume and, turning to a particular page, began to read:

"Some give up on beauty,
Others turn their back on truth,
But only when the heart shuns goodness
Does God's sweet light dim."

"Your own poets know what goodness is," said Jesus. "It is the very light of God"

He continued. "Truly, Rome has many clever men but a speck of goodness is greater than all the truth in the world. Whether one sits on a throne or works in the field, we are all equally subject to its rule. Consider the poor widow who puts two pennies into the temple treasury as her offering - all she has! Her act shines with the light of God but the large amounts comfortably given by the rich mean little."

Pilate was perplexed by Jesus' words. He tried to understand them but could not. Frustrated, he said, "Don't you realise that I have the power to release you or crucify you?"

"You would have no power over me at all" replied Jesus, "unless it was given to you from above. But yes, it is as you say, and that is your way - the way of the cross."

Jesus paused, looked at each of the men in front of him, and took a deep breath.

"I am already surrounded by death," he continued. "It is a serpent with three heads - one a stone, another an axe and the third, a cross. Yes, you are each a picture of death and I stand here, in your vile pit. Truly I say, the wholeness you will break today will become the wholeness of all who are broken."

After Jesus had said this, Pilate, Caiaphas and Herod came together and sentenced Jesus to death. Caiaphas had his Temple Guards take Jesus into the courtyard of the Praetorium where they bound him to a post and blindfolded him.

They began beating him, shouting "Prophecy, who hit you?"

After this Herod ordered that Jesus be flogged and a crown of thorns be twisted and placed on his head. Herod took delight in this, still angry at what Jesus had said to him before.



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

Finally, Pilate gave word to his most senior soldier that Jesus should be crucified. Jesus was made to carry to carry a great beam on his back and was led out of the city towards a hill shaped like a skull. The journey took some time because of the beating and flogging Jesus had already received. About halfway along the road he could carry the beam no longer, and the soldiers took a man from the crowd and made him carry it for Jesus.

Once at the hill shaped like a skull Jesus was crucified between two other men. The man on his left hurled insults at Jesus, but the man on his right recognised who Jesus was. "Master, I belong here, but you do not. Forgive me."

Jesus turned his bruised and bloodied face towards him. "Friend, as you have asked, it is done. Today, we will leave this world together."

Several hours passed and when he was close to death, Jesus looked down and saw his friends and family. They were in great distress. With his final breath and in great pain, he spoke to them. "Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Go, my friends, begin your work, for my death is your life, and I am with you always."



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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

We continue to meet via Zoom and have recently been very pleased to welcome people who have found us via the group page on the PCN website and we value having new ideas shared with us. It's great to find that people are spotting the information we put on and get in touch to join meetings. Our Feb meeting was focused on the life and ideas of Don Cupitt. Those for the coming months will use online talks given by key progressive Christian speakers as discussion starters. We meet on the first Tue each month so please get in touch.

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

At our Feb meeting we will be continuing our study of David Wood's "More Neglected Nuggets of the Old Testament". It includes a look at the Books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Proverbs, Job and Jonah. We start with Jonah in Feb. For each book David offers thoughts about its genre, structure and contents. This leads to a discussion of its major themes and theology. Various interpretative methods are suggested and the possible relevance of the book to today's issues are highlighted. Our group continues to meet face-to-face at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. In addition, for those who find it helpful, especially those living at a distance from Bolton, we send out a link to those who have indicated they wish to join us on Zoom. New members, living near or far, are always welcome. It helps to know if you plan to join us – so please contact Jim Hollyman.

Chelmsford Paul Gilman
07748623970 paul.gilman@pcnbritain.org.uk

The group has continued to meet monthly, on Zoom, which enables people to join from across Essex and even from Suffolk and Norfolk. For much of 2024 we discussed John Shelby Spong's 'The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic'. This provoked healthy discussion and not all of us were disposed to follow all of Spong's arguments for a completely non-literal and non-

historical interpretation of this gospel. However, I think it would be fair to say that most, if not all, of us would accept the idea that the gospel writer was, through the message of Jesus, trying to get his readers to step beyond our limits into a new understanding of what it means to be human. We have now moved on and the members of the group are taking it in turns to present what we, as individuals, actually believe now and what it means to us. In September last year we were saddened to hear of the death of our member, Rev. David Dickens. He was a much-loved and inspiring Methodist minister in Braintree and we greatly valued his contributions to our meetings."

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

We meet on the last Thurs of the month in person and have recently been discussing Brian McLaren's book "Life after Doom". This month we discussed ch.7 – Learn to See, and ch.8 - Seek Indigenous Wisdom. There was an animated discussion which – as usual – was quite political! We agreed that historically the rich and powerful have taken from the weak and vulnerable, and that this happened to the early church in different ways. In the UK society has become focussed on individualism, profit and privatisation leading to increased poverty and an over consumption of resources that is unsustainable. As we discussed ch.8 we wondered if it was even possible to return to a way of living that is simpler and not exploitive. Some of our members are involved in the Eco Church movement and we talked about the need for leadership – including in government – to bring about the big changes needed to address these problems, including the climate and biodiversity crises. Brian McLaren talks about 'Love not hope'. He says, " ...even if we lose hope for a good outcome, we need not lose hope of being good people, as we are able; courageous, wise, kind, loving, in defiance of all that is bad around us." (p.99)

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

We were fortunate that three of our members had attended the PCN residential weekend in Oct when Brian McLaren had presented his book 'Life After Doom'. They each chose particular chapters to introduce at our Nov meeting – a difficult choice, given the wealth of themes in the book. I list those chapter headings here as they shaped the thoughtful discussion which followed: 'Send in the Poets', 'Imagine Safe Landings and New Beginnings' and 'Beauty Abounds'. By way of contrast in Dec we looked at some of the details of the textile industry, using the book 'Less' by Patrick Grant. This has the subtitle which really says it all, 'Stop buying so much rubbish: How having fewer, better things can make us happier'. On the lighter side we couldn't resist reminiscing about the history of cherished jumpers but there was also serious debate on the ethics of the popular political aspiration of 'Growth' ... at any cost? It happened that the theme of our New Year meeting continued to ask ethical questions, this time on whether Britain's immigration detention system can be ethically justified. Our monthly Autumn meetings at Brunswick Methodist church have been based on self-contained themes, reflecting the interests and aspirations of the group. Our Sept meeting was ably led by Norman with a fascinating tour through Bible translations and versions with a look at the motivations behind the actions of the translators. We'd decided at the July planning meeting that we wanted an opportunity to speak freely about our own beliefs and uncertainties, in an unstructured setting without a pre-arranged speaker. This took place in Oct and I have appreciative reports from those who were there including the not unexpected comment, "We agreed that we'll need to continue living with uncertainty".

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

We meet as a book club under the heading 'Journeying Together'. Currently we're reading "Speaking Christian" by Marcus Borg which is giving us useful headings to spark off an open discussion. New members would be very welcome - we meet at 2.00 for 2.30pm on the first Tue of the month at Romanby Methodist Church, Northallerton.

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

We've been reading John Shelby Spong's last book, "Unbelievable: why neither ancient creeds nor the reformation can produce a living faith today". We are a long established book club and would very much welcome new members to explore with us the questions of contemporary faith and life. Meetings are on the second Tuesday of each month, starting at 2.00 for 2.30pm, at the Friends Meeting House in Great Ayton, North Yorkshire.

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth
radpilgrims@gmail.com

We currently we meet the second Sat every month in the afternoon in a room hired from a church in the centre of Tunbridge Wells, close to the station and bus routes. Subjects for discussion may be predetermined or spontaneous. Recent subjects have varied from the practical, such as the value of intercessory prayer, Quakerism to more abstract concepts of time, such as the difference between kairos and chronos. The invitation to members to describe numinous experiences or moments of awe in their lives proved most interesting!. In addition we are continuing with a weekly Zoom meeting but now on Mon afternoons, which is appreciated by those members living outside our more local catchment area who would find traveling to Tunbridge Wells inconvenient or impractical. Anybody in the southeast who would like to join are welcome to contact us.



Emergent Faith

Traditional theology looks backward to God
as the cause of all things.
Emergence theology looks forward to godliness
as its goal.

The set boundaries of the past have been replaced
by a world of change;
a world in which boundaries
are forever being exceeded,
new ideas developed, new possibilities foreseen.

This is a process of ongoing creativity,
with laws which are dynamic, probabilistic.
Over millennia, more and more
complex states of affairs
have arisen through this open-ended process.

With that increase in complexity,
new entities emerged
through the growth of molecules,
to multi-cellular beings,
to conscious beings, to moral beings (humanity),
and maybe beyond to an entity beyond imagining;
Something beyond our wildest dreams.

This concept is a far cry from Calvin's God,
or the bounded concepts of evangelical theology.
The process of evolution is one of openness
without the certainty of any predestined outcome.
We are free to triumph, or make a mess of it.

Such ideas can have a profound impact on our lives
and on our interface with divinity, spirituality, faith.
For we have been given this gift, life itself,
and are free to make of it what we will.
Not puppets in a predestined playlet,
but free to act and speak and do
for good or ill, or in between.

What we do has little real effect,
yet our ideas may spark ideas in others,
or our intransience may block another's path.
Our light can shine and expose the way ahead
even if we, you and I, can no longer travel it.
Even if our course is run in the present mire.

Far beyond our present existence
may lie a place of glory
where humanity becomes what it could really be.
Sometimes we can taste its distant scent
feel its aroma, touch its absent presence.

We may never know its fullness
but its reality lies within us;
a shadow, spirit, hope,
in which we trust,
put our faith.

Edward Conder
www.whisperdivine.uk

Reviews

The Spirit of Freedom by Mark Russ, Christian Alternative



The SPIRIT of
FREEDOM
Quaker-shaped Christian theology

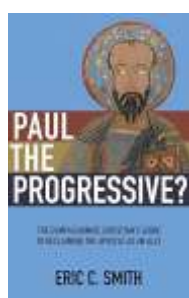
For those with a limited knowledge of Quakerism this is an interesting and informative book. Mark Russ, became a Quaker in his teens and, after a period as a music teacher, he went to

Woodbrooke, the Quaker learning and research organisation and became recognised as a Quaker theologian, teacher and writer. In 2013 he became an active blogger on JollyQuaker.com focussing on Quaker-shaped Christian theology. This book, his second, is based upon those blogs, amended or updated where necessary. At the outset it is important to remember that Quakers are to be found in large parts of the world and their theological beliefs vary considerably. This can be seen in differing approaches to Christianity even to the extent of some groups rejecting it altogether. The author, like most UK Quakers considers that Christianity has a role to play in his religious life. In the Introduction the author tells us that theology is not accepted by many Quakers and is even viewed with hostility by some. He strenuously refutes this with a powerful argument in support of it. This is evidenced by his reference to scripture from time to time. The main body of the book is grouped together in three themed parts headed "Speaking of God", "Worshiping God", and "Being God's witnesses in the World". The majority of chapters open with one of the paragraphs from "Advices and Queries" which is not a rule book but represents "the wisdom of the Friends brought together over the years". These provide a starting point for the discussion which can be particularly thought provoking especially when the author shares his own thoughts and experiences. Thus, when discussing those Quaker meetings which are completely silent for their duration, he shares his own experience. He tells of one silent meeting where he felt "a palpable, heavy presence of love in the room" although conceding that this has not always been the case. He considers "silence as a blank canvas", adding,

"... it's an offering. In Worship we offer our silence as we would offer a hymn or dance". Quaker meetings for worship do not adopt the same format and contain varying amounts of vocal ministry and consequently there is considerable diversity. Quakers traditionally do not celebrate Christmas or Easter but many will now have Christmas themed meetings in December and get inspiration from the Jesus story whilst not accepting his divinity. There are other examples of the freedom enjoyed by Quakers which makes it a fascinating and thought-provoking read.

Nigel Bastin

Paul the Progressive? by Eric C Smith Chalice Press



As one who has often referred to "the much-maligned Paul", I found this thorough examination of the attitudes and actions of the apostle by a NT scholar very

welcome. It deals systematically with the labels that have been placed on Paul: misogynist, homophobe, anti-Semite, prude, slavery apologist, xenophobe, guilt monger, and hijacker of Christianity.

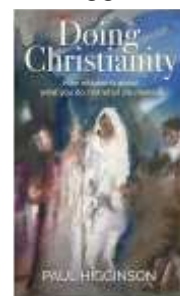
As to "Paul the prude", the author recognises that there is some truth in that label. Paul, he says, saw human sexuality as a potentially destructive force, especially in some Gentile communities. However, his endorsement of celibacy was contextual, seeing marriage and sex as a distraction to the urgency of preaching the impending end of the world rather than an eternal commandment. Paul definitely saw sex as an instrument of love and community to be exercised with mutual respect and justice.

The author points out that "justification by faith" was, in Paul's context, an issue of the admission of Gentiles into the covenant rather than of personal spirituality, and he takes up the recent discussion as to whether *pistis theou* means "faith in Christ" or "the faithfulness of Christ". The book's tone is pastoral and easily readable to the point sometimes of chattiness. At the same time, it is very thoroughly scholarly and includes an extensive bibliography. This is an ideal book to place in the hands of someone who

has a negative image of the apostle, and a handy reminder to preachers of all the reasons why that image is mistaken. Smith acknowledges that Paul was a flawed human being like all of us, but "a religious visionary, a proud Jew, a defender of the poor and the weak, a colleague to women" and an ally in the causes many of us believe in.

Ray Vincent

Doing Christianity by Paul Higginson, Columba Books



'This book is about not giving up on faith' and 'an invitation to return to the words of the gospel', an invitation to 'embark on a Pilgrimage within'. With a background of teaching Religious

Education and Politics, with experience as an Assistant Principal, Paul Higginson is now an Inspector with the Catholic Schools inspectorate in England. He has worked in the charity sector, currently a volunteer charity speaker. Commenting on Christianity as a religion the author notes the current trend for people to reject established churches. He invites readers to explore Jesus' call to an alternative way of life, as opposed to a set of beliefs, and discover the heart of what it means to follow him. This inner pilgrimage follows 9 steps, first looking at who God is, Jesus is, and who I am, moving on to new ways of seeing, doing, giving, praying and receiving. Each step is broken down into several chapters, with a gospel reading, devotional thought and questions for consideration. In conclusion there is an invitation to make this journey a life-long quest. Higginson's main argument is that being a Christian is not about holding to a set of beliefs (orthodoxy) but about living Jesus' way (orthopraxy). I warmed to the premise of this book; it affirmed my own spiritual journey. I found it a little slow and repetitive at times but recognise that this may be needed to emphasis a point. It would make a good reader for individuals or groups questioning 'churchianity' and who are searching for authentic Christianity. Higginson suggests that Christianity is 'an invitation to transformation'; this book is a tool which could enable that.

Meryl White

On Voice by Victoria Johnson, DLT



Victoria Johnson, formerly precentor at York and now Dean of St John's College, Cambridge, explores theology and the human voice, how God's voice has been represented and

speaks to us today. The book is full of insight, empathy and joy. She urges us to think of our singing voices as expressing our longing for meaning and connection, and to praise God by singing 'along with the voice of Christ in creation'.

Each chapter is part explanation and meditation, and allows readers to reflect on how they express their own thoughts with their voice. She suggests our musical heritage cuts through 'the roar of populism, and empowers those who are seldom heard.' There is sensitive reference to the loss of singing during Covid and to the voices that have been ignored. When she is 'the only one singing' at weddings and funerals she offers 'song on behalf of others who often seemed embarrassed'. She acknowledges her vulnerability: 'my voice has somehow got me here and helped me respond to the one who calls... It's like leaping into the unknown, a flight of faith.'

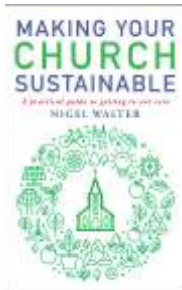
Johnson links Luther's belief that music holds the word of God and 'embeds the words of scripture to become flesh' with the 'singing revolution' in Estonia emerging from the Catholic and Lutheran churches. A third of the population came together in peaceful protest against Russian occupation. Her reference to Taizé music 'binding people together in a spirit of peace and reconciliation' will resonate with many. Other voices include Martin Luther King: his careful and powerful words come from a 'vibrant luminous anarchic, quivering, hopeful and musical voice'. Aristotle is cited: 'nothing without soul utters voice' as a warning about AI 'which is born in code'. The voices of birds are described as 'an expression of identity, being and ... their privileged place in creation'. Silence enters the story as the place where in meeting God we find prayers and can bring new sound to them.

This gentle author suggests God's light can be known too as sound and invites us to find our own voice within

the music of creation. Her final reference is to the Easter Exultet, the song that 'calls us back to our beginning and calls each one of us - in every corner of the universe - to resound in praise; in this song all voices find their purpose'.

Peter Varney

Making your church sustainable by Nigel Walter, Canterbury Press



Many churches are attempting to reduce their carbon footprint in response to the climate crisis. As of 2025, there are over 8000 churches registered with the Eco Church scheme and most of

the major dominations have targets to reach net zero by 2030. For most churches it is their buildings which are the largest contributor to carbon emissions, but it is this area which can be the most challenging to get to net zero not least due to pressure on budgets and high energy costs, but also as many churches have small elderly congregations, changes to old, large and sparsely used buildings can be very daunting. It is with this in mind that Nigel Walter, someone with a wealth of experience both with buildings and the church, attempts to simplify and to provide advice on how to proceed in making your church sustainable. Throughout the book, Walter's advice is clear and concise not just on the specific technologies such as heating (where Walter is particularly strong) and solar panels but also the processes to get there such as developing a plan, getting the necessary permissions and how to work with professionals. There is also a wealth of useful resources including a net zero checklist. Walter has grounded the book in eco theology and makes clear that it is part of the church's mission to respond to the climate crisis and to make buildings sustainable. There is also a small section on churchyards and biodiversity, which whilst useful could have been expanded as land is also very important in helping churches reach net zero and becoming sustainable. While the book is accessible to churches of all denominations, it does have a slant towards the Church of England and its processes and examples and whilst this is not inherently an issue, it could have made the book more

accessible if other denominations had been more included. These two criticisms are minor and take nothing away from what is a very helpful guide on how to make your church sustainable and is highly recommended to churches which are unsure of where to begin on the route to net zero.

Jeremy Flack

Blessed are the Women by Claire McKeever-Burgett, Chalice Press



'Listening deeply to women's voices and stories, asking them what it is they want and need to say, offering a sacred, safe place for them to say it', was the accomplished aim in this creative,

inspiring and provocative book.

The author is described as a creative, contemplative and spiritual leader who has dedicated her life to bridging spirituality and social justice. With sensitivity and vulnerability, she shares some of her story alongside the tales of women in the gospels. She exposes pain and trauma whilst seeking joy and healing in the journey of womanhood.

The writer dives deep into the Biblical characters and retells their story compassionately and creatively in the form of a monologue. The women are brought to life; their experience and wisdom courageously applied to contemporary issues such as abuse, poverty and injustice. Each 'Herstory' is followed by a liturgy which includes prayers, a chant, links for music, reflective questions, discussion starters and suggestions for action. It includes a small group guide, play list and reading list.

This is a book to savour and inwardly digest. I enjoyed the rich theology and careful Bible exposition behind each character. It is ideal for group study; whilst it focuses on women there is something for everyone to learn and be challenged by. For groups who want to make a difference in their community this is a prayerful guide for seeking the way forward.

'Empires fall when we follow Jesus. Dictators are eliminated. The reign of God really does come on earth as it is in heaven'. Such is the promise found in this book; such is its hope.

Meryl White

Waiting for Easter

How long I have waited,
Till the long dark nights are gone?
Wait until the days are equal:
... That surely is the time.

Must I wait now for the moon?
It's growing larger every evening!
See how full it now shines:
... That surely is the time.

No - wait until the seventh day,
Sunday is the day we need.
When welcoming a new day in:
...That surely is the time.

Yes, just at the crack of dawn
As soon as the sun is rising
Run, look, and we will find Him:
...This surely is the time.

But we find the tomb is empty.
"He's not here" is the reply.
Shall we go and find another?
...Is there another time?

When we'll look beyond the image?
Look beyond the rising sun?
Find the source of all our searching?
...Yes. Now is the moment. Now the time.

In 325, the Council of Nicaea established that Easter would be held on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

(Note: the church uses its own calculations of these events).

Tom Lloyd

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This is gentle and engaging film-making
Paul Northup, Creative Director, Greenbelt

I highly recommend the beautiful new short films from PCN
Brian McLaren

These films invite and inspire us to engage in the holy complexity of
Christianity Naomi Nixon, CEO, Student Christian Movement

A powerful and moving *film (Holly's story)*
Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford

Spiritually generous and heart-warming, Gemma's film shows that
only love can prove a faith Richard Holloway



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