

# Progressive Christianity Network – Britain

December 2010



Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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## Father Christmas

by David Kemp

Do you believe in Father Christmas?

We all know that it is a myth; he doesn't exist – does he? Try telling that to a three year old child on 25<sup>th</sup> December (if you are cruel and hard-hearted!). Look at the faces of children as they open their presents. Children don't question what they have experienced, they just accept that, somehow, it happens and their wide-eyed innocence adds to the wonder of it all. How he manages to visit every child in the world in one night, descend via chimneys too small to take the presents let alone his body - and some houses don't have a chimney – these are things which grown-up people question, not little children.

As they get older, they begin to question the practicalities of the event and, at first, are reluctant to draw any conclusions which would threaten the magic and excitement of it all. They then go through a period of denial that there is any conflict and gradually move to recognising that it isn't quite what they were led to believe.

So, do I believe in Father Christmas? The answer is quite definitely, YES, but not in the shape or

form that I believed in when I was a child. It has changed from the concept of a physical man to a less tangible, more abstract understanding of love, caring, sharing, giving and receiving. As we mature in our understanding we realise that Father Christmas is not someone or something outside us which visits once a year, but is within us all the time and wherever we are. We all can be the physical expression of that love if we recognise it, nurture it and allow it to find expression in our lives.

I believe there is a parallel here with the Divine (God). It is much easier and comfortable to remain in the simplicity and certainty of the fundamentalist explanation than to explore and evaluate the relevance of Orthodox Church teaching. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 13 v11) "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up my childish ways". Is a Progressive Christian one who is in the process of 'growing up' spiritually?

## Here Before Us A song for Christmas

Words by Chris Avis. Tune: In Dulci Jubilo

1. Our world cries out to be reborn:  
a world of pain, all tossed and torn.  
Babies born to mothers  
scarce old enough to yet conceive,  
like Jesus born to Mary,  
so young, so fearful, so naive;  
he was there before us,  
Jesus born that way.
2. Our world cries out to be reborn:  
where power abused is now the norm.  
Leaders lead with violence  
where life and innocence are slain,  
as Herod murdered children  
through fear of challenge in his reign;  
Christ was there before us,  
Jesus lived that day.

3. Our world of greed must free itself  
from worship of material wealth.  
Kings brought gifts to Jesus  
and laid their treasure at his feet;  
but he grew rich in spirit,  
in poverty he was complete.  
He was there before us,  
There to show the Way.

4. Our world saw light on Christmas Day  
when love drew breath amid the hay.  
In the Bible pages  
full of long-remembered tales,  
through metaphor and story  
the truth of Christmas still prevails:  
Jesus is before us,  
here to show the Way.  
Jesus is before us,  
he is here to stay!

### Notes and suggestions

The tempo should be a little slower than for 'Good Christian men rejoice', to suit the reflective nature of the words. In some verses, lines 4 and/or 5 have an extra syllable compared to the usual length, requiring the original first note of affected lines to be sung as two crotchets instead of a single minim. This is a simple modification musically and should pose no problem.

The extra two lines at the end of verse 4 repeat the tune of the previous two lines, perhaps with a suitable *rallentando*. If this is sung by a choir, the following suggestions might be useful, though probably inadvisable for congregational singing!

1. It could be effective to sing verse 2 a semitone lower, returning to 'normal' for verse 3.
2. Similarly, the more upbeat feel of the last verse might be enhanced by singing it in a higher key.

## Journey in Exile

By Philip Sudworth

The boy enjoys the loving fellowship of church;  
But as a youth he hears evangelists decry:  
"You're sinners all, condemned to God's eternal  
wrath!  
Repent! Believe in Christ's all-saving blood or die!"  
The youth has doubts which prompt these  
prophets' scathing scorn,  
"Then you will writhe in hell,  
while we're in heaven above."  
- "I will not fawn in fear to satisfy a God,  
So strict he can't forgive from feelings full of love  
Without a sacrifice; condemning most to pain;  
Who could ignore the Auschwitz cry of  
deep distress,  
But cures a Christian's common cold –  
or so you claim.  
I'd rather risk the rigours of the wilderness."  
In anger thus he speaks and turns his back  
on church.  
But there is sorrow too, a hunger never stilled,  
A shadow always cast through all the world's  
bright lights,  
A sense of loss, a feel of purpose unfulfilled.  
By now a man he starts a search for truth, and finds  
His fount of faith within a back street gutter, where  
He meets a modest man with vomit on his sleeve,  
Who's tending to a tramp with conscientious care.  
He asks him, "Why?" - "Because I see  
my God in him."  
- "Now here's no God enthroned on high  
we must placate;  
No king who says 'Don't judge', but would be  
judge of all.  
This God is living love, the power to liberate."  
Inspired, he searches scripture where he finds  
the one,

Who welcomed all - the leper, quisling,  
faithless wife,  
And offered freely wholeness, hope  
and sense of worth,  
Who came to serve. He sees that God was  
in that life.  
In service now he spends himself, but seeking still,  
And soon he glimpses this same God-shaped spark  
again  
In family and friends, and then in those he meets.  
This God does not direct, but suffers in our pain.  
He then perceives this power within himself,  
and knows  
That faith is in relationships, not ancient creeds;  
That love accepts us all completely as we are,  
With all our inner hopes and fears, our strengths  
and needs.

### Epilogue

Is there a place for such a one within the church,  
- Who can't consent to creeds nor sacrifice for sin?  
- Whose deity is not transcendent Trinity,  
But spirit flowing free and found by each within?  
- Whom Bible books inspire but  
aren't the final word,  
For modern texts give God a chosen channel still?  
- Who feels that souls are better saved through  
spending them  
In serving those in need; that prayer should seek  
the will,  
The inner strength, the peace and hope  
to act ourselves?  
- Not tolerated though in hope of change of heart,  
But whose firm faith is seen as source of  
common strength,  
Enabling him to play an integrated part?

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# Time to renew your membership!

PCN membership runs from January to December. So now is the time to renew yours for 2011. Included with this newsletter you will find a new affiliation form for next year. Please try and fill it in and return it as soon as you get this newsletter - and before it gets lost in Christmas! If you do by any chance mislay it over the holiday period, you can find a copy as a pdf on the website in the Membership section.

For the sixth year in a row the committee has decided to maintain the fee at £30 per person for 2011, with a reduced rate of £15, for those whose incomes are very low, and a donor rate of £45 wanting to support the growth and

development of the Network and who feel able to pay more. Additional donations can be made to all three rates.

We leave it to your own judgement to decide what you pay, and this information remains confidential. But you will see from the Chair's update below on the recent Management Committee's residential that we expect to have made a loss in 2010. So we hope members who can will consider seriously increasing the rate at which they pay.

I look forward as Admin Assistant to receiving your membership renewal.

**Andy Vivian**

## Letter from the chair

### update on the November 2010 residential Management Committee



The Residential Management Committee Meeting was held on 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010 at the Guy Chester House, Muswell Hill. The agenda was long and major issues that were discussed are itemised here:

1. A new honorary secretary, Ian McAllister, was welcomed to the Management Committee. Ian will review PCN Britain's modus operandi and has undertaken to review policies covering areas such as confidentiality, complaints procedure, employment, environment, equal

opportunities, risk assessment, and committee standing orders. He will also review the advice that is given to groups in the "Starting and Running a PCN Group" document to ensure our guidance is in line with Charity Commission best practice. The review will be discussed at the March committee and thereafter reviewed annually. In line with Ian's advice on what constitutes good governance the committee decided that the minutes of all its meetings would be published online, starting with this meeting. Minutes will be published once they have been confirmed by the following meeting, so, in the case of this residential, the Minutes will be

published immediately after the March 2011 meeting.

2. A new policy on underwriting regional events organised by local PCN Britain Groups was confirmed. Where a group asks to be underwritten, the Management Committee will request and discuss a detailed budget. The Management Committee will then undertake a risk assessment and if it agrees with the budget will also agree to cover reasonable loss if the event does not break even. Where the event makes a profit, this will be equally shared between the organising group and PCN Britain. The PCN Britain share will be earmarked for underwriting future events.

3. It looks as though PCN Britain is not going to break even this year. This is partly because we've made some investments in the group network - purchasing Living the Questions DVDs for the new library and gathering group convenors together for regional workshops. We've also taken on some new on-going expenses - a stall at Greenbelt, a busier committee schedule and more hours from the admin assistant. We also bought a new office computer - a substantial one-off cost. The deficit is about £3,000. The committee has kept the subscriptions for next year at £15 (reduced), £30 (full) and £45 (donor), figures that have remained unchanged for six years. However, we hope and ask that some of you may perhaps be able to move up a category when you renew your membership for 2011. Most of you renew in January and this is the official renewal date. Some of you joined later in the year and renew on the anniversary of your joining. If it is possible to have everyone renewing at the start of the year, this would be a great help.

The Management Committee is to dedicate its May 2011 meeting to reviewing the budget.

4. Major income generators have always been the national gatherings with headline speakers. It was agreed that the September Marcus Borg Conference in Edinburgh was a great success. The CD recordings of that event are nearly sold out and another 50 are to be ordered. Dominic Crossan has accepted an invitation to be the keynote speaker at a PCN Britain conference in October 2011. Regional conferences are being encouraged and the West Midlands PCN Britain interfaith conference "Reclaiming a Radical Faith for the 21st Century: an exploration together" has now been rescheduled for January 22nd. There are hopes that we might also have a regional day conference in the south of England next year. Recently appointed Management Committee member, Sonya Brown (a young curate from Leicester) is preparing PCN Britain's presence at Greenbelt 2011 where we are aiming to link with other organisations in the progressive fold. Sonya's plans include a drama/performance on the stage of the G-source tent. The next St Deiniol's residential will be on the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> November, 2011. The speaker is still to be confirmed. Looking further ahead we are discussing with our progressive Christianity partners to put on a major joint national conference in 2012.

5. Sonya is also leading a new PCN Britain subcommittee on engaging with younger people. Angela Smith, another recent appointment to the Management Committee, is leading on a new liturgy subcommittee. PCN Britain has produced a new "Welcome to a Progressive Church" poster, listing the eight points. This is available for downloading from the web or hard copies may be purchased through the admin assistant. The first two of the new study guides produced in conjunction with our progressive Christian partners, will be available for purchase before Christmas. The titles are "Walk the Jesus Walk" and "Jesus Then and Now". Both are by John Simmonds and will cost £2.95 each. Publication will be announced on the PCN

Website. Purchase will be possible online and by cheque sent to the PCN office.

6. Feedback from the Group Convenors' gatherings was positive. Ideas for group activities were pooled and a report is to be published and feedback sent to each group. However, returns from the Group Census were low, only a third of groups responded. This is being held open in the hope of eliciting more returns. From the responses so far, it is clear that groups value the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a network of progressive groups. A PCN Britain member living in Switzerland has requested the go ahead to set up an ex-pat PCN Britain group in Basel. The Management Committee enthusiastically agreed to support this new initiative. The Chair is leading the development of Skype-based Internet virtual groups for those members who cannot get along to local groups. A trial PCN Britain 'virtual' group is ready to be launched but it does need more members. If you are interested then please contact the Chair as soon as possible.

7. Future meetings of the Management Committee are scheduled for:

March 5<sup>th</sup>; London, St James's Piccadilly

May 7<sup>th</sup>; London

July 9<sup>th</sup>; Leicester

Sept 17<sup>th</sup>; St Columba's, York

The AGM will be on May 7<sup>th</sup>. The London venue is to be confirmed.

As you can see, the Management Committee continues to be extremely active in working to support the growing network, its groups and its members. It is estimated that local group meetings average 1 member to every 5 attendees. If more of these attendees could be persuaded to join PCN Britain our current financial / budget situation would be eased! On behalf of the Management Committee I thank all Group Convenors and local members for their on-going work and contributions to open thinking and positive action. These really are exciting days to be followers of the Way of Jesus!

**John Churcher**

## News from local groups

### **Bath**

(Sheena Carter 01225 331806

s.m.carter@pcnbritain.org))

The Bath group has had an interesting series of meetings this autumn, looking at how we can embrace the mystery that is God, how we can view the nativity stories in the light of modern scholarship (based on LTQ2), and looking at the first two of Borg's talks in Edinburgh.

We do not meet in December but will resume on 24<sup>th</sup> January with a talk by a Unitarian, and then in February and March will look at the third and

fourth of Marcus Borg's talks in Edinburgh on 'Being Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. Exact details will appear on the PCN website in due course. We normally meet on the fourth Monday of the month from September to May (excluding December) in the Central United Reformed Church Halls (Grove Street entrance) at 7.30 pm. If you are in the Bath area and would like to come along, please do, and feel free to contact the convener at the phone number or email address given above.

## **Birmingham and West Midlands**

(Tessa Carrick 01527 873135)

tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk

The group welcomes new members. Meetings are held approximately bi-monthly in members' homes, sometimes in afternoons, sometimes evenings, to suit members. Usually there are about a dozen members present. Presently we are discussing Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*, which is proving quite demanding!

Our next meeting is on Thursday 13th January 2.30.p.m. in Bromsgrove. Please phone or email for further details. The exact topic has not yet been decided but is likely to be one of the later chapters of *The Case for God*.

## **Bolton**

(Jim Hollyman 01204 456050)

jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

The next meetings of the Bolton group will be on Wednesdays, 12<sup>th</sup> January and 9<sup>th</sup> March at 1462 Junction Road West, Lostock, Bolton, BL6 4EG. We will be looking at and discussing the book by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan "The Last Week - What the gospels really teach about Jesus's final days in Jerusalem" - published by SPCK at £8.99. Brian McLaren, author of "A New Kind of Christian" comments 'Conservative Evangelicals usually think of themselves as the ones who take the Bible most seriously, but Borg and Crossan's *The Last Week* shows one of the most careful and insightful readings of the Bible I've ever come across'. Others say of the book that it is 'challenging and profoundly inspiring'.

Newcomers always welcome to our group. It helps if we know you're coming, so please email or phone (as above) in advance.

## **Coventry and Warwickshire**

(Nicola Phelan 01788 562562)

nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk

We meet in Rugby on the second Thursday evening except August and December. About 20 people have attended meetings at different times with an average of 10 at meetings. We have never followed a set book but have explored the eight points in the past and looked at part of 'Living the Questions' to stimulate discussion. Different members have introduced topics ranging from climate change and population growth to expressing our own spirituality and many people have shared their own spiritual journeys which has been interesting and helpful. There is a need for people to share and discuss issues and many find it an oasis as they struggle with less open Christian interpretations they find elsewhere, for the same reason we always have a time of reflection/silence which people also value. We share what we have learnt from conferences, books, CD's etc and we have Greenbelt veterans amongst our group as well as a new attendee (me). Several members also

attend the local inter faith forum and we promote other events that we find important to our faith e.g. a recent meeting with our MP on climate change issues. We welcome new members and one person would like to start a group in Coventry if anyone is interested. We send out publicity but so far most people come via PCN or word of mouth. We start our meetings again on January 13th 2011 when we will share things that have helped us in our journeys from books to conferences.

## **Edinburgh**

(Mary McMahan 0131 441 3337)

mary.mcmahan@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are enjoying having a more spacious room for our meetings this year, though still in the welcoming Cluny Centre on Braid Road, continuing on the last Monday of the month from 7.30-9.30... But NB: we have one extra session on 14<sup>th</sup> March this year...

In September we had a feedback discussion after the weekend conference with Marcus Borg, at which we echoed his plea for more adult theological education relevant to a progressive faith journey. In October four members shared a very interesting presentation about the eight points of the PCN logo, and this month we look forward to a Jewish-Christian dialogue titled: 'Coming together separately.'

Meetings in the New Year are as follows:

31<sup>st</sup> January: 'Hiding among the giant cabbages.' A member shares his journey of faith....

28<sup>th</sup> February: 'The Art of Haiku'... The antidote to religious verbosity!

14<sup>th</sup> March: 'Prayer and Liturgy - what are we doing?'

28<sup>th</sup> March: 'Whither progressive Christianity?'

We are an open ecumenical group and welcome newcomers, whether PCN members or not.

## **Exeter**

(Liz Vizard 01392 668859)

liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk

There are now 83 people on our mailing list, so lots of interest in PCN and an average of 20 attending meetings. Four theology students among others have recently asked to be mailed. We really need younger members - we are sure it is not only retired people who want a progressive forum - so students, please do come and meet us!

We had an excellent, stimulating and mind expanding session in October with the Rev Gareth Dyer - philosophy and sociology lecturer and Baptist minister. He took a philosopher's view of the topic 'Why we need a God outside us as well as within'. (See details of a CD recording of this on page 16 allowing other PCN members to share in this.)

In November we heard an inspiring faith journey from our member Noel Harrower, who introduced the book "Green Spirit - path to a new

consciousness", edited by Marian Van Eyke McCain of N Devon. Following this we were encouraged to discuss setting up a series of public discussions on topics of relevance to thinking people (leading to action it is hoped) and intend to approach our Exeter Christians Together and Interfaith groups with this in mind. We are very concerned at our, and the churches' failure to involve younger people and will look for ways to remedy this.

We haven't finalised any dates for 2011 yet, but plan to hire some DVDs from PCN Britain, invite some speakers of other faiths and hope to have our first meeting of the year Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan at 2.30 with no topic yet arranged. Contact Liz Vizard (as above) for confirmation of this and future dates.

### **Hastings**

(Peter Parr 01424 756218  
peter.parr@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Hastings open-minded discussion group meets regularly, now on the first Thursday of every month. Numbers vary from about 8-14 and new people are always welcome. Sessions tend to begin with a space for people to share – if they want to – any experiences they have had in the last month, interesting books they have read, events that they have attended, or questions that are on their minds. We then go on to explore a topic decided upon the previous month. Topics considered in the last few months have included our understandings of Easter, a session looking at the guiding principles that we try to live by, and another at which we reflected on how we can make a positive difference in our community and the wider world. We also had a session where we reflected on the meaning of belief, inspired by a talk given recently by Karen Armstrong at Friends House.

We come from different denominations and may have different understandings (though all of us are at the more liberal/radical end of the spectrum) – but we are an accepting group, and no one tries to persuade anyone else to adopt a different view! Further details from Peter Parr, as above.

### **Hickling (Norfolk Broads)**

(Merrie Longbottom 01692 598844  
merrie.longbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

On a weekly basis, the group meets on Thursday afternoons in members homes for a time of sharing, fellowship and discussion. We have finished reading Canadian pastor Greta Vosper's radical and challenging book, *With or Without God* - why the way we live is more important than what we believe - and can highly recommend it to other groups as a possible blueprint for moving forward. We have fortunately been the first group to borrow *First Light* from the new PCN dvd library. After viewing just one of the 12 sessions, we're excited about continuing this entertaining, enlightening and thought-provoking series by Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. There are

wonderful resources out there! On a monthly basis, our small group travels to Norwich to meet with a similar discussion group, several members of which are PCN-affiliated. While it's good to have a local supportive group, it's also encouraging to meet others who are on the same journey - everyone has a story to tell. We invite you to join us on this journey in Hickling.

### **Leeds, Yorkshire**

(Sandra Griffiths 0113 258 2652  
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Sandra writes: The Leeds Group meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church Centre (LS7 4NB) usually on the second Saturday of the month, with coffee/tea available from 9.30, between 10 and 12. I have to say 'usually' because I postponed both the September and November meetings by a week because some of us wanted to listen to Marcus Borg in Edinburgh and Adrian Alker in Sutton-in-Craven near Skipton on the second Saturdays of these months. Both events were worth postponing our regular meetings for. We hope to listen to and discuss recordings of the Marcus Borg talks in future months, as well as have some of our own members focussing our thoughts on topics of their choice.

Our fortnightly Monday evening meetings, *Questers*, continue to take place at the home of one of our members in Roundhay (further details on request). We are now discussing some of the chapters in *Tomorrow's Christian* by Adrian B Smith.

We are always pleased to see regulars, occasional visitors and newcomers alike, and both groups contain all such.

Please contact me for further information or directions to any of our meetings. It might be possible to arrange a lift too.

### **Manchester**

(John Ramsbottom 0161 456 5119  
john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Meetings resumed in September 2010 - we have a slightly different format this time, in that members are leading a meeting on a subject of their choice, or which was suggested when plans were discussed earlier in the year.

The September meeting was on "The nature of God"; October's theme was "Abundant life", which was a reflection on creation/stewardship of the earth, with reference to John 10: 7-15, and both prompted interesting discussions.

November saw us join with a "younger" Christian group called Sanctus I, in Manchester city centre, as one proposal was to look at progressive christianity and its relationship (or maybe lack of it) to younger people.

Thereafter, we will break for Christmas and hopefully resume in January 2011, when we intend

to base the meetings around the DVD course "Countering Pharaoh".

We meet on the 4th Wednesday of the month, usually at St Agnes church, North Reddish, Stockport and welcome anyone interested to join us.

### **Salisbury**

(Lavender Buckland 01722 780488  
lavender.buckland@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Seventeen people have expressed a warm interest in being part of this group - a very encouraging springboard. However, due to the considerable distances involved (from the north of Wiltshire to the north of Hampshire) it has been virtually impossible to get everyone together at the same time, in a place equally accessible to all.

For the time being, we are on hold: discussing the best way to pursue the aim of meeting regularly: probably forming a new group for PCN members near Devizes, and a distinct group based in Salisbury.

Various ideas have been put forward, including forming a "Virtual Group" using the PCN website Forum for discussions; or else 'meeting' more immediately, using Skype. Test runs, using conference calls on Skype, have linked 4 of us very satisfactorily - and could be an excellent way of connecting up to scattered members on, say, the Continent.

However, the consensus among existing Salisbury group members is strongly in favour of meeting face to face, and we are exploring how best to do this in the New Year.

### **Sedbergh**

(Martin Dodds 01539 620308  
martin.dodds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We continue to meet fortnightly on Friday evenings at the home of one of our members. We are currently looking at Adrian Smith's 'The God Shift'. Numbers are holding up quite well round about 10 from a variety of backgrounds, with new people joining as other vaguely similar groups reach the end of their natural lives, or individuals leave us to look for something less 'word-based' in their personal journeys. I wonder if other groups find that some quite sympathetic people are not really into the theological stuff? Are we missing a trick here? Time to read Hilary Wakeman again perhaps.

Every now and again we wonder if we may need to sub-divide, but this is not yet essential.

I also wonder if we are currently the most deeply 'rural' group in terms of our situation in a small country town of about 2000 people in a fairly sparsely populated tract of countryside. This generates potentially interesting issues of how to relate constructively to the local community where we need and wish to live in friendly co-existence

with a wide range of opinions and convictions which may find 'progressive' views anything from blasphemous to barmy!

Any readers especially in South East Cumbria or North Lancashire who wish to know more about us, please email Martin Dodds as given above.

### **Stoke on Trent**

(Ian Gregory 01782 614407  
ian.gregory@pcnbritain.org.uk)

A lively first seminar for this PCN Group in North Staffordshire group of PCN was held on November 6<sup>th</sup> at a United Reformed Church in Newcastle under Lyme. Graham Hellier, author of 'Free Range Christianity' addressed some 25 people on the importance of Kingdom values in social and political issues. Ian Gregory a retired Congregational minister, spoke about the way a new nonconformity was needed in Christian life and worship. Offering medieval creeds and practices was not likely to interest educated people any more. Science was now uncovering so many aspects of reality that we could no longer ask sensible questions, let alone answers, and a theology of 'unknowing', yet trusting, was called for.

### **Vale of Glamorgan**

(Janice Proctor 01446 401152  
janice.proctor@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Several members were privileged to hear Marcus Borg in Edinburgh. We were inspired by the life and witness of St John's Church, as well as by Marcus's lectures. It was also good to share discussions and compare experiences with other people during coffee breaks. A large number of books were purchased to lend out within the group.

On our return, we shared our impressions with the rest of the group and also with the Cardiff group. Now that the CDs have arrived, they are forming the basis for a more in-depth discussion of the talks.

Only a minority of the group are members of PCN but all are progressive (with a small p) and our discussions are both open and challenging.

### **Woodbridge**

(Julie Mansfield 01394 384370  
julie.mansfield@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Here in Woodbridge we don't seem to be getting any more organised or structured - we can't even agree on a mutually convenient day! For our latest get-together we agreed we would all read Brian McLaren's, 'A New Kind of Christianity' but after a well-intentioned start we turned to God. This may not be a bad thing. Or it wouldn't be a bad thing if we could agree - at all! - about who or what God is. Not that we fall out with each other, you understand - coffee and cake are good facilitators.

# Events Past

## 'Being Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'



*Neville Suttle studied for a degree in Agriculture at Reading University. His subsequent scientific career was spent in the Biochemistry Department of a veterinary research institute, though neither biochemist nor*

*vet! Ever eager to break new ground, he was in the vanguard of a 'worker-priest' initiative in the Scottish Episcopal Church in the early 70's, nursing a naïve notion that somehow this would 'break the mould of ecclesial politics'. He still serves in the same the same congregation (St James The Less, Penicuik). Inspired by Richard Holloway yet acutely aware that nothing has changed, he joined PCN three years ago and has never looked back. He reports on Borg in Edinburgh.*

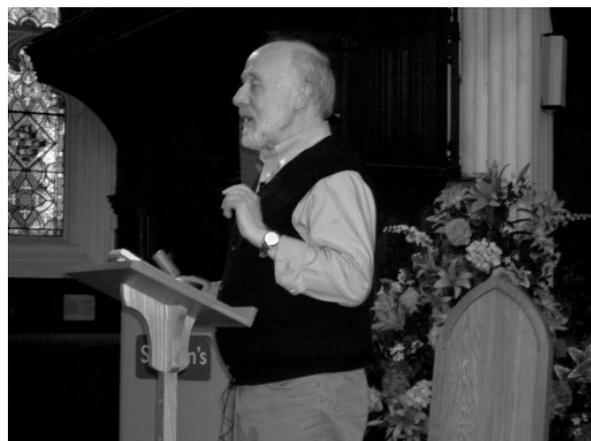
This was the running title of the 'Progressive Christianity' Conference in Edinburgh, held at St Johns Princes St., on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. The vendor of 'Big Issue' was selling few copies to arriving delegates, who were perhaps distracted perhaps by THE big issue on their agenda in three lectures from Marcus Borg. It was ironical that in five days time, Edinburgh was to host Pope Benedict XVI whose subliminal message was to be the very opposite: 'Being a Christian is the Same Whatever The Century'. In his welcome, the Rector of St Johns –John Armes- invited us to look at a topical mural being completed on the 'Princes St.' wall of the church. There, we found a mock stained glass window with three panels: to left and right, portrayals of Copoernicus and Gallileo, each with a large red 'X' daubed across the base; in the centre, a woman in black stood behind an altar, about to intinct the 'host'. The artist was up a ladder and about to complete his work - the third red cross! The proceedings inside St Johns were just as provocative to anyone passing that way with orthodox beliefs.

To those who had read any of Marcus Borg's many books, there were few surprises in what he had to say. To those, like me, who had never met him, there was an immense but reassuring surprise in the one stood at the lectern: a diminutive, softly spoken, humble and eminently 'holy' man. His declared threefold purpose was to 'reclaim the Christian language', 'move beyond literalism' and 'participate in God's passion for transformation'. His passion was to re-educate

Christendom and, if that sounded all-too threatening and subversive, he began a session with an ancient prayer which ended thus:  
*Grant that I may ever seek Thy face with all my heart and soul and strength;  
and, in thine infinite mercy, bring me at last to Thy holy presence  
where I shall behold Thy glory and possess Thy promised joys.*

St Alcuin of York (735-804 AD)

No change there then!



Most other religious conventions in the book and of The Book were, however, brought to book. Marcus Borg's thesis is that a literal and uncritical reading of selected (canonical) scriptures, themselves shaped by the customs and historical contexts of their day, had got the Church into an unholy fix. Constantine, the enforcer, had united church and state, bringing ill-founded order to both. The 'Enlightenment' had triggered a robust defence of 'The Faith' that state and church had forged. The outpouring of 'absolutes' from the Church to quell the eruption of doubt resembled (my analogy) the recent reaction of BP who, fearing widespread pollution, poured cement into the leaking oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. The ecclesial 'fix' now hung like a millstone round the Church's neck. Borg's answer? To drill down a relief well and tap the rich resources discovered through studies of the 'real' Jesus. Marcus was sympathetically questioned and enthusiastically applauded after each session. We had come from all parts of the UK and from all denominations and left with the impression that here indeed lay the way to 'possess the promised joys'.

The pope has been and gone and some will have been captivated and moved at times by the spectacular ceremony surrounding the

'rapprochement' between two great churches, doing what they are good at. However, their 'Big Issues' were studiously avoided. The standing of both churches in society may be threatened by 'aggressive atheism' but their internal peace will also be put to the test by a 'progressive

### **Comments from others who attended**

*Janet and Malcolm Tanner from Devizes*

It was a terrific experience to hear Marcus himself, and to meet him, and the opportunity to be with so many other like-minded people was a great joy and encouragement, especially as we met people who live quite near us. There may be another group on the way!

*Wendy and Nicholas Gray from Glasgow*

Thank you for such a happy day in Edinburgh on Saturday. We made the most of linking up with others and thoroughly enjoyed the stimulus and opportunity to take our thinking on further from what we were hearing from Marcus.

*Eilie Blackwood from Edinburgh*

Borg, with his natural, practical and humorous manner, fully engaged us for a whole day. His plea

christianity' movement, which is determined to rediscover and express Jesus' compassion for those who suffer hunger, sickness, poverty and oppression. I sensed a quickening of the papal cavalcade as it neared that provocative mural but the 'real' issues are less readily by-passed.

is to "pass it on!" Our church's minister now includes on every printed Service Sheet, the Statement offered to affirm our position on "The Interpretation of Holy Scripture":

Being Christian involves being shaped by the language of the Christian tradition, including the Bible as the foundation of the tradition. Some in this church understand Christian language quite literally and factually. Others understand it symbolically and metaphorically. What we share is a common passion for the more-than-literal meaning of the stories and teachings that shape us.

Our House Group will use the tapes during Advent. Borg's idea of an "inter-generational discussion group" is next on the list.

## **Convenors' Regional Meetings November 2010**

The three October gatherings were born of the expressed desire of convenors to meet together informally to get to know others in their geographical area and to share ideas and experiences. As the person who was present on all three occasions, I can confirm that while there may have been slightly different emphases in each, there was consensus about the great value of groups to the individuals within them.

In London one person said: 'I can't imagine doing this (convening a group) without the back-up of PCN' and in Nottingham we heard a comment from a group member who said: 'Here is where I count'. There was shared agreement too about the need to stay aware about where we're going, how we spread the word, and what our focus is...

The programme was similar for each venue – in the morning, telling our stories of how our particular group came to birth, and some sharing about the process at meetings and resources used. In the afternoons, we looked at direction – where we might or could be going as a progressive network...

Ten of us met in the newly refurbished URC church centre in Windermere on the 9<sup>th</sup> October. Interesting to know the variety of ways in which groups were spawned – one from links with Alan Powell at the St Deiniol's weekends, another came into being after a Sponge tour, another because a radical minister came to town...!

The afternoon debate, when participants had been fortified by a pub lunch, took us into deeper issues. Rather than attempt to summarise a stimulating hour, perhaps a couple of quotes will convey the flavour:

'We have outgrown conventional theology, and need to find a new paradigm'

'We have talked enough – now we must live it'

'Everyone's convinced, so where do we go now?'

I think it's fair to say that what emerged overall in Windermere was a sense that the future lay in interfaith engagement, and in mystical experience rather than adherence to dogma, as well as with active support for organisations committed to a transformational ethos.

On the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Midlands area, nine in number, convened at St John's College in Nottingham. Again a variety of prompts for the genesis of particular groups – one after the convenor found Hugh Dawes' book in a second-hand bookshop, another after attending an event at CRC in Sheffield. Often the value of mutual pastoral care among participants was mentioned, and the relief of being with others 'on the same wavelength', and in one case of finding it 'great to be somewhere where we can talk about God...!' We looked a bit at the process and content of meetings, as part of the 'resources' slot. Of the

many good practices identified, I mention only a few:

- Starting with Open Agenda –where anyone is free to share a concern
- Feedback from watching a TV programme
- An e-mail being circulated in advance of the meeting with a brief summary of the topic for that session
- Discussing articles from papers, including the tabloids
- Ditto with the Guardian's 'Face to Faith'
- 'Bringing something from your world' to connect with individual passions
- 'Living the Questions' and other DVD titles.

I think it's fair to say that in Nottingham the consensus was very much that we need to keep talking as well as to support individuals in their work for justice and peace. It was felt that that combination may be what gives PCN its uniqueness....

The third group – thirteen in number - met in Bloomsbury Baptist Church in the centre of London on October 30<sup>th</sup>. The same diversity in origins – one PCN group was born from a church Lent group; another was formed from the nucleus of three churches' ministries, yet another as a reaction to the non-appointment of Jeffrey John to the House of Bishops.

More than one convenor spoke of the relief at 'being able to ask questions', of the feeling of liberation within her PCN group, another of delight at being able to explore the world of faith with others. It was felt to be important that members could be open together and learn from the wide spectrum of experiences of others...



Again, in the afternoon we explored issues and concerns more generally. I'll simply indicate those by quoting from the session:

'How do we spread the message of PCN?'

'What are we supposed to do with this knowledge (of progressive Christianity)?'

'What can we tell the children, that they won't have to unlearn...?'

And we were reminded of Borg's affirmation that it is not belief which is transformational....

I thoroughly enjoyed each of these gatherings. To the committee members who facilitated sessions – Sandra Griffiths, Angela Smith, Philip Goodwin and Terence Cooper, a very big thank you. It was good to meet many participants who had just been names before. To all of you, many thanks for your input to the days. I hope our paths may cross again...

**Mary McMahon**

## Events to come

### RECLAIMING A RADICAL FAITH FOR THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY: AN EXPLORATION TOGETHER

Saturday, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2011, 1- 6 pm.

A conference for Christians to reclaim a radical faith from a presentation of a personal understanding of both the Jewish and the Muslim faith.

At Ladywood ARC, St. John's and St. Peter's Church, Darnley Road, Ladywood, Birmingham B16 8TF. Organised by the West Midland and Birmingham Group of the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN-Britain).

Introduction and Chair: Richard Tetlow

Speakers: Salma Yaqoob, Leader 'Respect Party', Birmingham City Councillor

Dr Margaret Jacobi, Rabbi, Birmingham

Progressive Synagogue

**Good Parking** (see [www.stjohnpeter.org.uk/church/location.htm](http://www.stjohnpeter.org.uk/church/location.htm)) **or 66 bus** from Queensway Priory Square.

Cost £5. Please bring your lunch, drinks are provided. Numbers are limited. Please apply a.s.p. to Richard Tetlow, 26, Sovereign Way, Moseley, Birmingham B13 8AT; 0121 449 4892; [richardtetlow@btinternet.com](mailto:richardtetlow@btinternet.com)

*And in July*

## **‘Can These Bones Live?’ – Reading the Bible Today The Annual Conference of Modern Church (formerly the MCU) 12 – 15 July 2011**

at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Herts.

2011 is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible, or ‘Authorised Version’. *Modern Church* believes that knowing *how to read* the Bible is just as important as knowing what is in it. So we have designed our 2011 annual conference to focus upon how Christians in the present are to be imaginative, faithful readers of the scriptures. We will face up to the embarrassment many parts of the Bible continue to cause us. We will avoid nostalgia for a past era of Christendom. We will not make exaggerated claims for the Bible or allow literalist readings of it to impair our understanding and harm our souls. Instead we will seek new ways of engaging with the Bible and letting it engage with us.

The speakers are: John Barton, Susannah Cornwall, Maggi Dawn, Gerard Loughlin, Alison Milbank, Francesca Stavropoulou, Christopher Rowland and Adrian Thatcher, who will chair the conference. Alongside traditional lectures, some of the sessions will include time for viewing pictures, watching film, studying TV programme clips, doing contextual Bible reading together, analyzing short pieces of literary texts, and doing some theological reflection in small groups, in a cafeteria-style conference setting.

The cost is £250 for an ensuite room, £200 for a standard, both with all meals included. Some discounts may be possible. More information from the conference secretary: Tel: 0161 633 3132 or email: [conference@modernchurch.org.uk](mailto:conference@modernchurch.org.uk).

## **Why a PCN Britain Progressive ‘Liturgy’ Project? (Form and content of services, rites, prayers and music)**

*Angela P Smith convened PCN groups in the East Midlands until her recent move to Dundee. She is a graduate in Theology, a member of PCN’s Dundee local group, and part of the ‘church alumni association’.*

In an article in the last newsletter, Philip Sudworth asked, ‘Who is Progressive Christianity for?’ and then asks how we might ‘Make an impact on the general public?’

Philip notes that there is good evidence, within British society, of a largely untapped spirituality ready and willing to respond to the right stimulus, and he further remarks, ‘if we are to make an impact on the general public, we have to find a route round the controversies and get directly to the people who need a new vision of what life is about’. And I agree with Philip: how we do that is the prime challenge for progressive Christianity.

One way of ‘getting directly’ to at least some of those who seek a new vision of what life is about, is to offer new forms of services in or through our groups and in churches sympathetic to PCN’s vision. This would provide opportunities for regular sessions of corporate spiritual reflection that affirm just this. Surely progressive Christians need to proclaim and demonstrate, far more often and publically than they do at present, their commitment to a new dream? This would certainly be a means of positively communicating to the world in general the new vision we work towards.

It would be good to hear others say of us, ‘You will know them by what they say as well as by what they do’.

At present the sacred tradition of the church routinely expresses post Easter theological paradigms that alienate many of us let alone members of the general public, because of the problematic theology espoused in hymns, liturgies and even from the pulpit. Instead, as Philip says, ‘Faith has to be seen as being...more about how we treat one another than relationships within the Trinity; more about values than doctrines; more about promoting justice here on earth than fear of God’s judgement; more about acts of love than condemning sin...more about healing and wholeness than substitutionary blood sacrifices...and more about what you are as a person, than what you believe’.

Listening to what people say within groups I have been privileged to attend, it appears that many are busy de-constructing the dominant paradigms of faith and, at the same time, are beginning to construct new models of something they feel hesitant to call ‘Christianity’; even though what they are constructing springs out of their often profound and rich understandings of Christianity. To crib from The Centre for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) website, progressive Christians are beginning to ‘construct a new model of Christianity that is compatible with deep

spirituality, religious pluralism, sound science, good common sense, compassion for the needs of humanity, inclusion of all people and respect for the environment'.

This is all very well and very good, but in considering the newly emerging models of Christianity the notion of a Liturgy Project seems a crucial and logical step. Such a project could offer one way in which PCN might discover who progressive Christianity is for, whilst also helping progressive groups and churches grow in spirit and number as they put into practice new approaches to the content of services that are, hopefully, designed to give goodly/godly expression and meaning to our lives in the here and now.

When talking in the groups, something so many seem to hold in common is the need to express 'accurately' what they mean and intend when they pray, sing hymns or participate generally in institutional rites and services. Many progressive Christians within the churches seem largely unsatisfied with, or even unwilling to use, the anachronistic words, ideas (creeds), theologies or language of 'traditional liturgies' as they fail to affirm or illustrate their progressive understandings and practice. Equally, many who are on or beyond the edges of church, lack the spaces where they might even begin to express their spirituality in any religious or corporate sense. However, in the event, many who join PCN and/or its groups are unlikely to find anything other than the (often robust) cerebral discussions that take place within group meetings. Important and essential as PCN's group meetings are, yet, in listening to folk, I detect in them a spiritual longing for something in which they could participate; if only because they are also, in some sense, faith-filled people who are co-inheritors of a western Christian legacy. These are people who give a lot of thought to the theological meanings and sociological implications that are being represented within the services and theologies currently offered by the churches.

At present, PCN is doing a great job in providing 'safe' forums for discussion and education for Christians, post Christians, and those who would actively reject the label Christian, all of whom find common ground along with spiritual and/or intellectual sustenance through engaging with the space we have named 'progressive Christianity'. But here, I think, is the rub; if we're not careful we will end up engaging with and offering nothing more nourishing or fulfilling to the human soul or psyche than a satisfying cerebral pursuit that supports individualist approaches to living and pursuing a goodly/godly life, albeit based on a common Christian heritage.

And this is happening whilst at the same time so many traditional and regular churchgoers continue attending churches unaware of the impact their

words, liturgies and worship often have on society, the church and those around them. This begs a question concerning the role of PCN; might it rightly become a catalyst for liturgical and theological change alongside offering safe spaces for discussion? Otherwise, if we are not careful, nothing in practice will really change, but we'll all feel better for having talked about it!

In his article Philip is concerned that we in PCN will waste much of our time and energy trying to make an impact on traditional church teaching and, quite rightly, notes that 'those who hold the power and influence in the church are also those who will defend it vigorously, entrenched behind bastions they have built up over centuries'. I want to suggest that a progressive Christianity liturgy project helps us to propose a very different approach to that of trying to make an impact on traditional church teaching. If there is any truth in our emerging new model of (progressive) Christianity then we have no need to challenge traditional church teaching.

All, I would argue, that we are called to do is to be 'faithful' to what we 'believe' to be good and true and, therefore, Godly (however you might understand this term). I want to suggest that creating and implementing new, alternative, or reformulated (progressive) liturgies or forms of services proposes a different yet parallel path that does not seek (or need) to be in competition with traditional church teaching. Rather, it seeks to offer a different diet, under-pinned by different theological reflections (much of it yet to be thought through), to those who need a different way of being nourished, assured, and comforted as members of a goodly/godly community. In this way we will be making lateral moves rather than wasting energy on pre-emptive strikes against traditional teachings.

As Jack Spong famously says, 'Christianity must change or die'; but Christianity as most people know it in Britain today, will not and cannot change unless those who seek change, and see the need for change, offer at least some of the means by which the changes can happen. And it is even conceivable that eventually, those who are currently un-churched or de-churched might begin to take notice of the change that is emerging and find something within it that is attractive and worth exploring after all; for there are few people in Britain today who know absolutely nothing of Christianity.

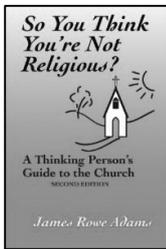
The Liturgy Project then is entirely compatible with the aims of PCN as it seeks to encourage those in the groups (and beyond) to create, discover and make available liturgy, prayers, hymns and other associated resources that can begin to provide the faiths communities of emerging progressive

Christianity with liturgical language, a language for worship, that is both relevant and inspiring.

If you (or someone you know) are involved with progressive congregations using services or liturgies

that you are willing to share through the PCN website and other outlets, then please contact me [angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk). I look forward to hearing from you.

## Book reviews



### **So You Think You're Not Religious A Thinking Person's Guide to the Church (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) by James Rowe Adams**

St Johann Press 2010, pb, xiv + 288 pages ISBN 978-1-878282-64-4  
\$18.95 from Amazon.com

Reviewed by Philip Sudworth

In my article in the September 2010 Newsletter I queried how progressive Christians can connect with those outside the church and encourage them and empower them to move forward on their spiritual journey. This book, which is written in a very accessible style and illustrated by effective use of practical examples, anecdotes and people's personal experiences, provides many of the answers to these questions. If you have friends who are close to falling off the edge of church or who have already left reluctantly, because they felt that they had to choose between their faith and their intellectual integrity, the combination of encouragement and practical advice in this book may well be the ideal Christmas present for them. If you are struggling with many aspects of church yourself, you might like to put it on your own wish list.

James Rowe Adams, the author, is the founder of The Center for Progressive Christianity and has been at the forefront of the development of progressive Christianity. He writes with the insights of 30 years' practical pastoral experience as rector of St Mark's on Capitol Hill in Washington, which attracted many who had given up on conventional Christianity, and this is very evident in the down-to-earth advice which runs through the book. The first edition published in 1989 was written primarily with Episcopalians in mind but this revised and expanded edition takes account both of a wider audience and of the developments of the last two decades.

The clear primary message of the book is that you can have a questioning and sceptical mind and yet still gain a great deal from belonging to a church or being involved in spiritual practices. It is made evident that faith is not so much about believing as a way of living in relation to others and to the higher things we experience in life. It is a search for meaning which is better carried out in a supportive community. The opening chapter explores practically the benefits of

church for non-believers, taking the view that people need a place to ask the unanswerable questions. Church, instead of being a place where people profess their convictions about God, is portrayed as where people acknowledge their longing to be in harmony with the creative force. He develops this theme by exploring the gospel as a healing message of freedom and responsibility and then examining in more detail what faith is about and how the modern emphasis on intellectual beliefs has distorted the original meaning. Both these chapters give a refreshing approach that allows for both commitment and intellectual integrity.

In Part 2 he examines the barriers that often come between thinking people and an active faith and suggests interesting ways round them, giving a chapter to each main aspect: the bible, doctrines about Jesus, creeds and prayer. His encourages people not to be put off by literal approaches to the bible but see it as a reflection of human experience, a way of seeing the truth about human beings and their relationship and the rest of the universe, and thus understanding ourselves better. The discussion about how doctrines about Jesus have arisen is set within the intriguing framework of Jesus as "the friend of doubters", and he points out that Jesus was questioning the religious authorities when he was as young as 12. The creeds are treated as expressions of human longing rather than intellectual religious propositions and he takes a fresh, constructive look at some of the phrases that cause thoughtful people problems. The chapter on prayer is full of practical suggestions on how both intercessory prayer and contemplative prayer can be helpful even to a sceptic.

The third section looks in a straightforward way at the key points in our lives, marriage, birth and death, and considers how the church rituals can be of great help to us in responding to these, if we can get past the doctrinal wording to the

heart of what the services are about. In each case there is a helpful guide to those unfamiliar with church as to what they might expect. The section concludes with valuable suggestions as to how those with a questioning mind might access and benefit from the regular Sunday worship.

I asked in my article how we share our faith if we don't deal in certainties and suggested that we share ourselves with all our questions and doubts, our hopes and fears. In this book James

Rowe Adams has given an excellent example of just how to do that.

I found this to be more than a book you read once and then put on the shelf. Within the flow of the main message, I kept finding spiritual nuggets, which suggested rich veins of thought. I am looking forward to re-reading the book and to exploring these points in more depth.

**Philip Sudworth**

## **Atheism: a Guide for the Perplexed by Kerry Walters**

Continuum 2010, pb 195pp. ISBN 978-0-8264-2493-8. £12.99 from Amazon.co.uk

### **Reviewed by Duncan Craig**

It may seem odd to describe a book about atheism by a professor of philosophy as a joy, but so it is. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the author is credited with co-founding a peace and justice studies programme in his college, as this book attempts to do justice to a range of arguments for theism and atheism, while maintaining that the debate can be conducted in a spirit of peace and reason. He treats the reasoned arguments of the New Atheists with respect, while quietly making it clear that he has no time for their angry rhetoric. His method throughout is to carefully lay out each argument for and against the existence of God, along with the relevant criticisms and counter-criticisms. What becomes apparent is that neither side in the debate can claim to have a killer argument in philosophical terms. The only drawback of the book is that the author presumes a basic knowledge of philosophical method on the part of the reader, although this presents no real obstacle.

In one chapter, the author steps back from the realm of reason to suggest that we each have a basic world-view, a set of often unexamined assumptions, that tends to determine our approach to major questions. Thus the existence-of-God debate is largely conducted from fixed positions and is not really a debate at all. He closes the book by making his own case for an atheist spirituality and suggesting that, for instance, a sense of awe and wonder at nature is a place where theists and atheists might meet.

Logically, of course, there can be only two views: you either believe in God or you don't. Kerry Walters, while no doubt accepting that logic, would suggest that there is a wide range of positions on each side, making the distance between any believer and non-believer dependent on the details of their particular standpoints. This book has restored my faith in the possibility of reason, mutual respect and intellectual humility in a world which seems increasingly to be driven by fundamentalism of all kinds.

## **Without Buddha I could not be a Christian by Paul F. Knitter.**

One World, Oxford, 2009. pb 336pp. ISBN 978-1851686735. £12.99 (£11.99 on Amazon)

### **Reviewed by Adrian B Smith**

A word about the author first. Paul Knitter is a Catholic ex-priest who was a member of the Society of the Divine Word for 23 years. His writing career began after he left that missionary society and has concentrated on inter-Faith studies. He has written ten books on this subject. He is currently Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

This book, as the title suggests is autobiographical. He alternates in the text between particular difficulties he has with Christian beliefs and practices and what he calls "using my Buddhist flashlight" to throw (for him) more meaningful explanations. A few examples.

He understands "Salvation" as coming to the realisation that we have the potential to become Christs. It is "our own awakening .... Our own discovery of our divine nature" "A wakening up to our own unity with God, or oneness with the Spirit".

He quotes Karl Rahner as saying that Jesus realised the full potential of human nature. "He remains one of us, though he "arrived" way ahead of most of us." (pp116-7)

It is not surprising that he devotes a good portion to the subject of meditation (in the Eastern meaning of that word,) though he does distinguish the Western ascetic terminology: "Meditation is looking from the outside into the unitive experience of God. Contemplation is looking from

the inside out – from within one’s oneness with the Divine, for which there are not adequate words.” (p.139) He adds (p.154) “Buddhism can help Christians to be mystical Christians.” He expands on this: “We Christians need an additional Sacrament. It is the Sacrament of Silence”. A Sacrament we need to receive as frequently as everyday. (p.153)

As a person who is active in Justice and Peace matters – especially in Latin America – he tackles the meaning of the Kingdom of God, (which throughout he refers to as Kindom, to be politically correct!) especially the perplexing question of its being present now and at the same time not yet. He struggles with the seeming contradiction between the Christian’s duty to bring about God’s plan for the coming of the Kingdom on earth (Don’t we pray “Thy Kingdom come on earth”?)

## What does Christmas mean to me?

*From the editor’s chair*

*The editor was commissioned to write this short article by the editorial team of The Bridge, the newspaper of the Anglican Diocese of Southwark; one of several written from different perspectives for this year’s Christmas issue of the paper. He offers it as a seasonal reflection to PCN members also.*

The meaning of Christmas is extraordinarily simple. It’s about the birth of a baby. The baby happens to be Jesus, the first child of Mary and Joseph. But it’s an inclusive, not an exclusive story. A story grounded in the everyday miracle of new life and new birth, and telling of the hope and the joy that can generate not only in parents and close family, but in all who encounter a new-born child. So much seems to be possible.

Of the two rival gospel stories of the birth of Jesus, St Luke’s is far and away my favourite. To grab our attention, Luke starts with a portrait of power, the Emperor registering the whole world. But he then jumps immediately from there to the lowest of the low – Palestinian shepherds looking after a few sheep. Ordinary and nobodies, it’s them who get it. They are able to welcome the child who lies in an animal’s feeding trough. They have eyes to see. They feel the limitless possibilities of a new life. They can hear, and do, the heavens singing.

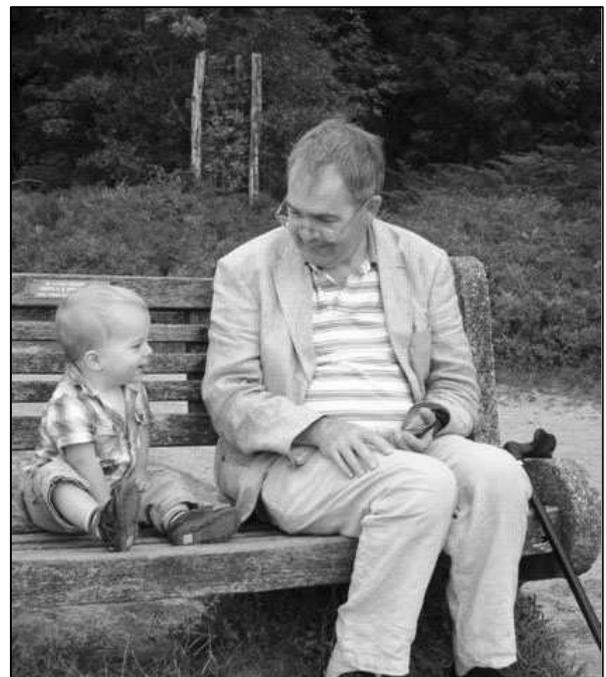
This simple meaning borne by Luke’s Christmas story did not go unchallenged for long. Luke was able to see in Jesus all that God can be in an ordinary human life – from

with what he calls “the starkest contrast between Buddhism and Christianity”, that Buddhists have no eschatology: the world isn’t going anywhere. They don’t believe in an end point for history, when accounts will be settled. So how can Buddhists make the Kingdom present, he asks. He neglects to make any mention of the many researches that have found the relationship between people meditating and its effect on the environment, reducing stress, for instance.

As Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr – as well as Buddha and Jesus before them – realised, the best weapon for changing the hearts of oppressors is to love them. These words of Jesus might be quoted of the Buddha: “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28)

I found this a most helpful book.

helpless child to criminal condemned to die. But neither secular authorities nor the emerging authorities in the Christian ‘religion’ could be content with that. The powerless Jesus felt very threatening. You were better off dealing with the Emperor; better off reinstating an all-powerful God in the heavens.



Hugh with his oldest grandson, Alfred

Still Luke’s so simple meaning challenges me each year. What is my life, any life, for? Am I here to grab at power; or submit to power; to play safe; keep things the way they always have been? Or dare I, no longer young, live as if a new born child? Can I be a vehicle for

God as Luke saw Jesus to be? Can I be God's agent for good and a world transformed; God's feet, hands, heart, and voice?

At the end of our Christmas Pageant two years ago in the parish I belonged to, the children taking part, pointing first to Jesus in

*And a new CD*

## 'Why We Need a God Outside Us'

with the Rev Gareth Dyer

The Exeter local group's report on page 5 of this issue says that they "had an excellent, stimulating and mind expanding session in October with the Rev Gareth Dyer - philosophy and sociology lecturer and Baptist minister. He took a philosopher's view of the topic 'Why we need a God outside us as well as within'".

This new recording of that meeting allows you to join with the members of the group as they explore the edge of philosophical approaches to

the crib, then to themselves, sang "See that little child lives in this little child, and when I heard that Christmas truth this little mouth smiled."

Christmas is so simple. We need only dare to live it.

'God'. Is seeing believing? Is being wrong more productive for a church than being right?

Gareth Dyer is a sociology/philosophy lecturer and part-time Baptist minister whose open discomfort with the traditional church has encouraged him down paths of thought that many may find challenging but ultimately productive.

Single CD £3.50 inc postage from Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN. Please make cheques payable to C. Avis.

**Fitting contributions** into this issue has been a tight squeeze, and I apologise to any whose pieces have not been included. It is a delight to the editor to have so many more people wanting to contribute. But space is limited. This time we have one article of almost 1500 words, one of 1000, one of about 850. But others as long or longer have just had to be left out. There is virtue in brevity – and brief pieces can sparkle more than long and laboured one. A New Year resolution there maybe for us all!

**Copy date for the next newsletter.** Contributions for the March issue (including local group news) **must** reach the editor, Hugh Dawes by **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> February 2011 - at the very latest**, preferably a bit before. Email them please to [hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk), or if you are posting them send them to Hugh Dawes, 28 Highshore Rd, London SE15 5AF (an address for the newsletter alone!)

Easter is monumentally late next year, so you might prefer to contribute thoughts on Lent and Holy Week; on our moral fragility as well as our human glory; on Spring. You might like to pick up and respond to some of what's in this issue. And I can't believe I'm the only member of this Network who actually finds much *delight* in being christian and church, rather than cause for endless complaint! If that fits you, it would be good to hear from you. Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on your envelope if you use post.

The Progressive Christianity Network – Britain (Registered Charity No 1102164) is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations, and has links in particular with the Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States. PCN Britain's website is online at [www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk), with information and resources. TCPC's website also offers a wealth of material for open and progressive Christian understanding. Visit it at [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org). You can email us at [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk), phone us on 01594 516528, or mail us at PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire GL14 1BB.

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