

# Progressive Voices



19

December 2016

**Bethlehem Overlooking** by Maysa Al Shaer

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bethlehem\\_Overlooking.jpg#/media/File:Bethlehem\\_Overlooking.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bethlehem_Overlooking.jpg#/media/File:Bethlehem_Overlooking.jpg) Public Domain

# An English Rose

Where were you?  
I missed you today.  
Though to be honest  
it wasn't till later on  
I sensed that  
you had gone.

You took your seat  
In a doorway at  
The corner of Melcome  
and Baker Street where  
in humdrum  
monotone  
you asked us to find  
some change.  
'If we would be so kind.'

Commuting troops passed  
Your stone paved throne.  
Some offered their tribute  
others deferred  
their salute;  
perhaps deterred  
by your silver blue sceptre -  
a tinny of Tenants extra.

With the Queen's head  
once or twice I said hello  
and placed her face  
in your yellow  
tobacco stained hand.

A princess up the road  
Got flowers by  
The shed load.  
We didn't know her,  
still how we cried  
that day in Paris  
when she died.

By your gate florists  
ply their trade  
but no English rose  
at your place is laid.  
Don't know what to say -  
'Sorry' I suppose.

All the same...

The doorway's silence  
speaks your name  
and like God we find  
you in the absence  
left behind.

Wonder where God was today  
when you died?

Jude Bullock

## Words Will Out

They tumble and fall, they teem and spill.  
They hit the target, they fly far wide of it.  
They tell so much, they convey so little.  
They add, subtract and multiply.

You can put them to work or set them to music.  
They cheer and distress.  
They leap out at you and hide from the memory.  
They are on the tip of your tongue but won't co-operate.

They seem to travel faster for lies than they do for truth.  
They fly to please you and return to hurt you.  
They seem to have a mind all of their own.  
They sing in the poem and sigh in graffiti.

They can break a man or make a man.  
They are a wonderful tool and a dangerous weapon.  
They can give a man immortality and they can take away his life.  
They can put you on a pedestal or a cross.

How can such tiny things have such enormous power?  
They can make a meal or start a persecution.  
They can seal a treaty or start a revolution.  
You never know what words are going to do next.

They are so innocent but are always being found guilty.  
They run riot but you can't imprison them.  
You can make them whisper but you can't make them be silent.  
You never know where they are.

They can be still in your mind or bounce off the moon.  
They hide in machines and show on our faces.  
They can tell tales and build castles in our imagination.  
Life without them would be unbearable.

They fashion what we are and give us an inkling of who we are.  
The right word can bring us home.

Whoever invented them must have been a genius.  
'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God'. (John 1:1)

Raymond Guy

# Welcome

Well after all the excitement prior to last issue, its a good that nothing major has happened since!?

Whatever our feelings about the US election, or the ongoing fog of Brexit, our task is clear. Engage.

Whatever the opportunity, conversation, interaction; offer a positive contribution. One of the responses I've seen about Trump's victory is to encourage those thinking of moving to Canada to instead move to a predominantly Republican state and become a teacher. Don't give up. Engage.

In this edition we reflect on the success of Brian McLaren's tour, introduce you to Robin Meyers, who will be delivering the 2nd Marcus Borg lecture, and promote many more upcoming events.

There are initial details about our AGM, an update from the trustees, local groups, the liturgy task group, and we'll ponder whether we need a new Reformation, if religion is mythology, and the situation in Syria.

In this season of Christmas, with its images of snow and stables, donkeys and sheep, shepherds and kings; I hope the cover will create space for you to reflect on the reality of Bethlehem, both now and 2000 years ago.

Welcome to the 19<sup>th</sup> edition of Progressive Voices.

Enjoy!



## PCN - Annual General Meeting A BIG CONVERSATION

Saturday 1st April 2017

12.30 – 4.00pm

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Mindelsohn Way,  
Birmingham B15 2TH

We would like this to be an opportunity to have a big conversation with members from all parts of our network and from as many groups as possible.

**Progressive Voices** is the magazine of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain [Registered Charity No. 1102164]. It is published quarterly in March, June, September and December.

PCN Britain is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations.

You can contact us at 01594 516528, [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk), or PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB.

Further information, including details of publications and conferences, is available at

[www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk)

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There is an open invitation for submissions. Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions are all welcome.

Publication is at the discretion of the editor:

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**Copy Deadlines:**

**Mar: Friday 10th February 2017**

June: Friday 12th May 2017

Sept: Friday 11th August 2017

Dec: Friday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2017

# Letter from the Chair

To friends across PCN Britain

I am penning this letter on November 9th in readiness for the December edition of Progressive Voices. I have woken up to the first snow of winter hitting the Pennines and gently falling now on the hills of Sheffield. The radio tells me that Donald Trump has been elected as the 45th President of the USA. It's tempting to stay under the bed sheets!

We are living through tumultuous times, both in our own United Kingdom (for how long united?) and across the world. In recent decades we have rejoiced to see the downfall of barriers such as the Berlin Wall and apartheid in South Africa. In many places today there is fuller inclusion for women, gays, peoples of different ethnicities and many minority groups into the mainstream structures in society. But now there is talk of a wall to keep Mexicans out of California, immigration controls are the order of the day in our own country, and the Arab world, and many other places, tear themselves apart in sectarian violence. The barriers go back up. Hope and despair seem constant companions.

Yet our small voice of progressive Christianity joins with others in asserting that there is another way for humanity, often promoted by the highest ideals of different religions and philosophies. That other Way for many of us in PCN, is of course the Way of Jesus of Nazareth who also lived in a world dominated by military power and divided by race and religion. That Way of Jesus, as Brian McLaren reminded us through his latest book and tour, was not about a subscription to sets of beliefs and second-hand religion but the experience of compassion and love for the other person and of anger at the injustices and cruelties of the world.

The eight points, which act as a guide for our progressive movement, emphasise that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and to confront evil and encourages us to build up intentional communities seeking to enact this Way of Jesus. It is understandable that many people fear what a Trump presidency might bring and equally what Brexit could mean for the well-being of the UK and for Europe. Yet such events occur not in a vacuum but as a result of deep anger, dissatisfaction and often a sense of hopelessness by many who find themselves in poverty or alienated from the wealthy and the powerful.

At the time of Jesus many looked for change, for a Saviour to come, often through military might, to be a new King David. The Christmas stories in the gospels remind us that instead they saw in Jesus the Way of peace, compassion and inclusive love and, yes, a burning anger to change the unjust systems which oppressed the poor and the weak.

This is why progressive Christianity matters as we work with people who share the same desire to follow the Way of Jesus, even if their religion or ideals are not couched in the same terms. Together with all people of goodwill we need more than ever to agree on what it means to be fully human, to radically challenge the structures which oppress and impoverish the majority of our fellow citizens and to work for a more equitable and peaceful world.

I have had the pleasure in 2016 of visiting a dozen PCN gatherings in England and Scotland, and often discussion has been around the word radical, used in the title of my book. The Way of Jesus, I believe, is a call to radical action if we are to work for the good of all humanity. I am grateful to Chris Howson who offers these four guiding principles in defining radical Christianity:

First there is a biblical imperative to act on the side of the oppressed through faith in a God of justice. Many radical Christians such as Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu have done just that. Surely progressive Christians need to be radical in speaking out for this God of Justice?

Secondly as Leonardo Boff suggests, our deep sense of compassion is a mark of radicality which comes out of personal engagement with those in poverty, those excluded and in need of liberation. Taking the journey downwards and being with the poor and marginalised is in itself a radical action.

Thirdly radicals have often faced persecution and exclusion within society. Take that famous quotation from Dom Helder Camera: 'When I give food to the poor they call me a saint – when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist'. Radical Christians are not always welcome, even in some of our churches!

And fourthly radical Christians often live in joyful solidarity in community with others as Jesus did in calling forth disciples. Do we not find such close friendship and intentionality in PCN itself?

So I take heart on this rather dreary and unwelcoming November 9th morning. The Light will not be overtaken by the Darkness, Love will conquer Evil; if together we work ceaselessly for the Way of Jesus in our world.



**Adrian Alker** serves as the  
Chair of PCN Britain  
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# Compassion

## Charter Tool Box

<http://www.charterforcompassion.org/index.php/communities/charter-tool-box-framework>

Following our promotion of it in June PV, Michael Hell has tried it out in practise:

The Charter Tool Box rightly underlines the need for action to create Compassionate Communities. What can be achieved will be limited if we do not also learn to think and speak compassionately, for ourselves as well as for others. For this we will need to unlearn the judgemental mode to which we are accustomed and learn the language of compassion as set out in Marshall B. Rosenberg's book 'Nonviolent Communication'(NVC). Rosenberg also uses the image of an endless string and running round it are the words: 'Observations, Feelings, Needs, Requests, Observations'. 'Observations' means describing the situation objectively without judging. We then look for the 'Feelings' that arise from what we see, and use these to determine the 'Needs' that may, or may not, be satisfied. 'Needs' are defined as the basic human needs – autonomy, celebration, integrity, interdependence, physical nurturance, play and spiritual communion – listed by the German-born Chilean economist, Van Neef. When we know the needs, we can make a positive request for somebody to do what makes life more wonderful for everybody.

This may involve going around the string several times, but Rosenberg remarks that talking about needs, rather than what is wrong with each other, greatly increases the possibility that everybody's needs will be met. The problem is, as Jonathan Haidt remarks in 'The Righteous Mind', 90% of our judgements come out spontaneously, which makes objective observation difficult.

In the second edition of his book, Rosenberg devotes a whole chapter to being kind to our self. He emphasises that we nearly always have a choice. Therefore we should exclude from our vocabulary 'should', 'ought', 'must' and 'have to': we should say what we have chosen to do. Life becomes more wonderful if we can be positive in the way we speak.



NVC is not easy, especially for Christians who are taught to think of themselves as undeserving sinners. The parable of the Prodigal Son suggests that God is an expert: concerned that God's and our needs should be met without insisting on repentance and forgiveness. Perhaps we too should give it a try?

Michael Hell

# Poem

The invitation has arrived  
to step into our courage  
and our full humanity

from this day forward  
the harm can only unfold  
and multiply and spread

with our silence  
with our consent  
with our participation

we will not be silent  
we do not consent and  
we will not participate  
in legitimating violence, lies and division

we will claim and assert the only true power  
the love that we are  
the love that connects us all  
the love that bends history  
even in this dark moment  
towards liberation

the time has come to live love  
without fear and hesitation  
no matter the price

We are one  
we are many and  
we are one  
it is time  
dear friends  
the revolution of love  
must be completed

And it is only possible  
if on this day  
we commit our lives  
to walking the hard road  
because there is now only one way forward

adapted from work by Taj James,  
Movement Strategy Centre

# Report: Spiritual Migration

On the balmy evening of 14th Oct St. Thomas' Church, Haymarket, Newcastle upon Tyne played host to a wandering American prophet from Florida. Rev'd Dr Brian McLaren, who, as is the wont of such, was promoting his latest book as part of a UK wide tour. The talk and the book are both entitled 'The Great Spiritual Migration' and the one summarises the other.

He began by reminding us that migration is part of the way things are, part of the pattern of Creation itself. One illustration being the migratory pattern of the swallow-tailed kite, a remarkable bird which flies 5,000 miles from Florida to southern Brazil and back each year.

Original human beings migrated from south central Africa, across the then existing land masses to many different parts of the world. Today thousands migrate to Europe in search of a better life.

Migration is also a biblical concept. Abraham left the city of Ur not knowing where he was going. Jacob's tribe migrated to Egypt in search of food and reunion with Joseph. The Israelites, escaping from slavery, began a migration to the promised land. The other exiles and returners are further stories of migration. As an infant the Christ-child and his parents migrated to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. Paul's journeys can be seen as migrations which spread the good news of Christ.

Thus the story of humankind and of our religion is one of continuing migration. Even the universe itself, far from being static, is in constant movement. Our religion is intended to lead us ever forward, for we are a migratory people. We live in times of great changes and the Church so often seems to react to them retrogressively and nostalgically. Christianity in all its denominations has become compromised with self-preservation of various forms.

So McLaren argues courage is required to set out on the great migration, which is characterised in three ways:

1. A Spiritual Migration: From a system of beliefs to a way of life/way of love. Christianity has all too often been associated with a set of beliefs, an idea which can be traced back to Constantine's takeover of the Church. Doctrinal statements defined who was in and who was out. Supposed 'certainties' became tests which led to bigotry, racism and misogyny. But we are not 'saved' by a set of beliefs, rather by obedience to Jesus' two great commandments which were re-affirmed by Paul (Romans 13), who also said that faith without works is dead. Love needs to shape our whole lives in families, in communities, in politics and in every aspect.

2. A Theological Migration: From the concept of God as a violent, patriarchal supreme-being to non-violent Holy Spirit/Spirit of Christ. Christianity has so often been a school for violence and not love, as seen in the cover-ups and denials with regard to various forms of abuse.

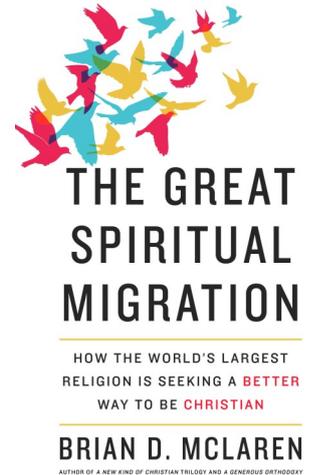
The passages in the Bible which deal with war,

violence and genocide as divinely sanctioned need firmly repudiating. God must rather be imaged in terms of self-giving love and as a renewing Spirit at work in the world.

3. A Missional Migration: From an organised religion designed for self-protection and preservation to a movement organised for the common good which practises the ethic of love involving care of the planet, peace-making and the struggle for justice. This is the good news as opposed to the invitation to join an institution.

Christianity, some say, is one generation from extinction. But on the other hand it could be one generation from conversion and rebirth, so long as we are a migrant people in the way McLaren suggests.

The evening ended with a question and answer session and a book signing. Brian McLaren was warmly thanked and applauded for his time with us, all too short, and then presented with a Geordie Bible as a keepsake.



**Richard Firth** is an active retired Methodist Minister in Tynemouth, who believes that theology is an ongoing adventure.

## UK tour by Dr Val Webb 2017

In 2013 and 2015 Dr Val Webb, the Australian theologian and author, visited the UK to give talks to churches and PCN Groups on material from her many books (see [www.valwebb.com.au](http://www.valwebb.com.au)).

Val is returning, and is again willing to talk to churches and PCN Groups from Monday 1 to Tuesday 23 May. She is offering a range of topics:

- 'How can we or can we speak about God in the 21st Century?'
- 'Always Progressing and Evolving: present and future progressive directions'
- 'Practising theological hospitality in theologically diverse communities'
- 'Celebrating doubt as a catalyst on the faith journey'
- 'Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology: finding your own voice'
- 'Florence Nightingale: the making of a radical theologian'

If your church or PCN Group would like to host Val for an event, please contact Robin Story, by Sat 14 Jan:

**0114 2336 2251** [robin.story@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:robin.story@pcnbritain.org.uk)

# Update from PCN Trustees

## News for members from the meeting in November

Twice a year the PCN trustees meet for a 24 hour overnight stay at The Hayes, Swanwick, which allows time for detailed consideration of many aspects of our work as an organisation. Here is a summary of those conversations and decisions made at our last meeting.

It has been a very busy autumn with a highly successful Brian McLaren tour, organised principally by two trustees: Richard Gray and Paul Onslow, and well supported by PCN groups at each venue. Nearly 1000 people pre-booked tickets, the great majority being non-PCN members, which gave us the opportunity to speak about our work and recruit new members.

We looked ahead to our programme for 2017. The popular Australian theologian Val Webb will be on tour again in April and speaking to PCN organised events. Then on 13 May we have our second annual Marcus Borg lecture, this year in Bristol when our speaker will be the American theologian Robin Meyers – not to be missed! Greta Vosper makes another visit to the UK in October and will be speaking in Leeds and Birmingham.

Our members residential this year takes place at the attractive Foxhill Retreat centre at Frodsham in Cheshire from 13 – 15 October. We shall be looking at life journeys and their significant moments.

The trustees have also decided to mark our Annual Meeting by holding a half-day's discussion and workshops with as many group members and convenors as can join us for that occasion on 1<sup>st</sup> April in Birmingham. We very much want to connect with what is happening in our groups and to share ideas and support. We are offering to help each group with travel costs to enable at least one person from each to attend.

At the request of Sea of Faith, we shall welcome some of their trustees to join us for lunch at our next residential and learn more about each other's organisations.

We are in the fortunate position of having a rising membership (now standing at approximately 670 members) and together with the profits made on the recent McLaren tour, we are to fund the design and printing of new attractive leaflets promoting PCN and introduce the 8 points. We also hope to ring-fence a sum of money which will help towards the production costs of a PCN course – our own Living the Questions perhaps!

At the Annual Meeting we shall ask members to agree a change to our constitution which will allow us to elect 15 and not 12 trustees. We want the trusteeship to be able to better represent geographically all parts of the UK and to include a good spread of age and background.

We spent a fair amount of time discussing our presence on social media and in particular how we can improve our Facebook page and allow for more interaction and debate. Watch this space!

And finally, we were delighted to accept the challenge from one of our members to begin a process of thinking through how we can attract younger people, i.e. under the age of, say, 50 into membership, and we are to set up a task group to work on this.

These are some of the main areas of discussion, and as ever I am grateful to all the trustees for their hard work and dedication to PCN. I hope that this report is helpful and encouraging to members, with a reminder that we are always looking for new trustees to come forward for election at the Annual Meeting.

**Adrian Alker**, PCN Britain Chair

## Members' Residential Weekend

13th- 15th October, 2017

**Life Journeys ..... Cairns along the way**

Foxhill Centre, Tarvin Road, Frodsham, WA6 6XB

[pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk) or [sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## New website for Progressive Christian worship leaders:

[www.worshipwords.co.uk](http://www.worshipwords.co.uk)

Worship Words has arrived to feed the souls, hearts and minds of progressive Christians with ready-to-use words for worship and personal reflection.

Ana Gobledale: [worshipwordsmatter@gmail.com](mailto:worshipwordsmatter@gmail.com)

## Liturgy Task Group update:

All 45 items so far submitted have been considered. We are much impressed by the quality of material offered and are recommending 32 of the prayers and liturgies to be used as they stand, and the remainder to be used in appropriate contexts with local editing.

Each author has been contacted and discussions are now under way about 'tweaking' and adjustments. Some dynamic dialogue is resulting between the Group's convenor and PCN member liturgists.

The next thing is to make the items available on-line, which, thanks to Andy Vivian, PCN's web editor, this will happen shortly. Meanwhile, do look at that website as there are some items already available.

In the meantime, feel free to continue to submit any pieces of 'radical/progressive' liturgy via the PCN office that have worked for you, or your group.

The next step for the LTG is to contact organisations like the Iona Community and Free to Believe, Modern Church etc to see if we can do some liturgy sharing.

**Tony Rutherford** - PCN LTG's Convenor



# A new Reformation?

## Do we need a new Reformation? - Re-claiming the Church

Luther's moment of truth came as a realisation that the Church was making it impossible for people to see God. The time had come for a reformation. Four centuries later, we see Luther's unimpeded vision of God distorted by modern Biblicism and various kinds of idolatries, including that of managerialism.

Luther lived on the edge of the Church's life. His was a revolutionary ethic in which faith was the primary virtue. Such faith would even supersede love. This would lead to a reversal of priorities which would ultimately compromise Luther's theological legacy in allowing the reinforcing of clerical and secular power.

But Luther did, paradoxically, bequeath freedom to the Church. Its spiritual life had atrophied. From now, his famous 'stand' would make it possible for people to question the psychological hold which a highly politicized Church exercised on their lives and, more specifically, on how they related to God.

A comparable situation exists in the Church of today, and particularly in my own Anglican tradition. It has become a highly politicized 'organisation' and, like any organisation, it must justify itself on the high street by remaining commercially viable. The Church is increasingly anxious about remaining viable, while at the same time maintaining a system of governance which would be untenable for any secular organisation.

If the Church needs a new Reformation it will need to begin with a review of its concept of authority and resulting system of governance. At present, the governed, especially those on the edge of the Church's life, as well as some clergy and people who faithfully turn up on Sundays, feel either out of touch with their bishop and his representatives, who they rarely see, or undervalued. As a result of this disconnection, many of them are also beginning to feel out of touch with God.

The 'unchurched' (people who 'get God' but don't 'do Church') are put off by the institution and by clericalism. The 'de-churched' (those who once went but now don't), face a similar problem. They struggle with arcane gender specific language, and are puzzled or bored by what is all too often banal and inconclusive preaching. All feel marginalised by the institution's seemingly unquestioned adherence to a remote and meaningless concept of authority and governance. Incumbents often feel this too. They must speak and behave in ways that signal their support of the status quo.

Return this scenario to Luther's own ecclesial context in which the Church's political power was closely bound to that of the monarch and we see a once iconic Church (the Church of England) now simultaneously controlling and out of touch with its members – right across the Church spectrum, from laity to senior clergy. This has

led to a climate of distrust and to inner fragmentation that feeds other divisions, specifically those relating to gender and sexual orientation. These divisions give rise to damaging power games among clergy and, as a result, the Church is losing sight of what it is about – which is freeing people into God.

The more the Church loses sight of what it is about, the more it senses a need to be both viable and relevant and this diverts its attention from the human need for freedom in God. This suggests that the Church needs to rediscover the vital component of trust which makes freedom and friendship with God possible.

Trust is the basis of faith. It makes faith and love mutually sustainable. Together, they constitute the dynamic energy which resonates with the life of the Trinity, the energy of love between persons. Thus, in the life of the Church, faith and love ought to neutralise the human desire for power and status.

A management-driven Church confuses authority with secular power and obliges bishops to assume a dual identity. They are required to be both the secular 'boss' and the monastic abbot. This dualism undermines their confidence and may even lead to a form of identity crisis. When should they be 'boss'? In what situation, should they be abbot? When, if ever, can they be simply human? The status paraphernalia which surrounds the most senior clerical posts does not help them make these decisions.

The confusion and uncertainty generated by such a blurring of roles has spiritual, as well practical, consequences for everyone. It also leads to cynicism and mutual ill will between bishops and their clergy and undermines trust between clergy and people, with the result that some, including clergy, are losing faith in the institutional Church altogether. Furthermore, since the two models contradict each other, the Church is now perceived as 'neutered', an institution in which God and Mammon have cancelled each other out.

While the institution known as the Church of England remains iconic, this is less true of the disestablished Anglican provinces some of which are winding down even faster than the Church of England. The spiritual vacuum in which the Church as a whole now exists - as a result of internal division and preoccupation with status - is undermining its confidence. As a result, it appears to those on the edges of its life to have lost sight of what it is really about. What is its purpose? What truth does it witness to?

The truth of the Gospel lies in forgiveness, and in reconciliation and healing. Existing divisions, uncertainty about what we are called to be, along with preoccupations about the viability of the existing structure and the value of material assets that go with it, make it hard to communicate this truth.

The Christian idea of truth is the outworking of faith and love. Truth is revealed in the way we treat one another as a result of what we say we believe. Thus, reconciliation is not just a matter of patching up differences and 'moving on' but of having the courage to 'move more deeply into' the full picture of any given issue in a desire to discern the face of Christ there. In this way, we prepare the ground for new and sometimes surprising revelations of the truth of the Gospel. The reconciled Church is therefore a prophetic Church.

A hierarchical and status-ridden authority system does not help it to be prophetic. Anglican authority is traditionally modelled on principles of collegiality. Its authority and leadership is corporate and visionary. Simply giving orders and expecting everyone to toe the line does not generate the kind of trust and friendship needed for a visionary Church life, one that shares the envisioning work with those in authority.

Luther's moment of understanding came about through an encounter with a God whose faithfulness proceeds from love. Love is the living Word which returns to God bearing within it the life of the Church. It follows that the Church, as opposed to the organisation, ought to resist all that blocks the living Word. Those who do resist are often on the Church's perimeters. They witness to freedom in God, and freedom from fear, fear being one of the greatest inhibitors of love, and hence of life, in the Church.

The institutional Church is becoming increasingly introspective, because it fears failure. The nagging sense that it needs to justify its existence on the high street, to be 'relevant' ('irrelevance' is synonymous with failure), bears no relation to God's specific purpose for its life. God's purpose for its life is not 'relevance'. It is forgiveness and healing. This is what people who come to church are looking for.

They are also looking for something which will resonate with their search for meaning. Some may go to their local church because it answers their need for silence and space and because they sense that the church building is a place where people have 'waited for the God to speak' to quote the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas. Others seek wisdom for the times we live in. They hope that the person ministering can trace a path for them with sermons and the kind of pastoral care which will help them work out their salvation on both a spiritual and intellectual level. The teaching ministry, viewed as a pastoral task, remains one of the most important gifts which the Church has to offer.

All these people are waiting for coherence and meaning, for vision and direction and for release from old habits



**Luther's Rose**

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/anulyra/5851288772>  
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of mind. They are looking for the kind of leadership which will point them to new life in God, a God who waits to engage with his Church from within his own silence, as he also waits in the noise and activism which claims our society and much of the Church's life. God waits in its anxiety and in its transience.

Management priorities impede genuine encounter with God. But good management will enable the Church and those who minister to relearn the art of listening – listening to people from within God. In order to do this, it will need to let go of its fear of failure, and of the preoccupation with numbers which goes with it, so that it can grasp the more important things which are of God, beginning with the unique gift which each person brings to its service.

Good, imaginative managers are also visionary leaders. They know how to discern and deploy the gifts which others bring to the corporation, which is not the same thing as looking around for someone to fill a vacancy. This invites questioning. Does the Church need to adapt itself to people's gifts? If so, it suggests that Church structures need to be far more malleable.



**Lorraine Cavanagh** is an Anglican priest and acting General Secretary for Modern Church.  
<http://jobbingtheologian.blogspot.com/>

# Is Religion Mythology?

I recently set myself the exercise to identify which of the statements in the Nicene Creed, written about 300 years after the death of Jesus, I could honestly assent to. I could not do so without limitations or explanations, and my adaption of it is as follows:

I believe in *(the possibility of)* God.

I believe in Jesus son of Mary *(and probably Joseph)*.

I know as historical fact that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried; that He was called Christos, the Anointed, by his Jewish followers, who believed he was the Messiah.

I believe that he rose again *(but only in the sense that the spirit and power of his teaching lives on, 'let loose in all the world' as a force for good)*.

I believe that *(in common with the emperor Augustus)* he became known as 'Son of God' *(possibly as a subversive challenge to the Roman imperial cult)*.

I believe in *(the teachings of)* Jesus.

I believe in the Holy Spirit *(as a possible manifestation of God)*, and that it has spoken through the prophets *(of the Old Testament and through many other prophetic voices since)*.

I believe in one holy and universal Church *(as an aspiration for all Christian people)*.

I acknowledge my own baptism as a Christian *(but I acknowledge and respect other religions)*.

I acknowledge the power of Christianity's sacred foundation Myth, as set out in its creeds and devoutly believed in by many Christians of every denomination.

I write this not to try to convert anyone from or back to some 'true faith' which I feel duty-bound to defend; rather, as Jonathan Sacks eloquently argues, 'Religion is at its best when it relies on strength of argument and example; at its worst when it seeks to impose truth by force.' The best way to convince doubters of its truth is to acknowledge that much of what we say in the Nicene Creed is mythology, which is the invention of the not so very early Church, first drafted in 325 AD, redrafted (but not improved) in 381, and finally settled at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 under the Emperor Marcian – but as it turned out settled only for the churches of western Christendom. In those early centuries the sacred story, the Foundation Myth, on which Christianity is founded was still evolving in a largely non-literate and naturally credulous society, where story-telling and folk-history were almost the same thing and the walls between the secular and the divine were much more permeable than they are today.

The more we acknowledge the mythological dimension of our own religion, the more likely we are to carry credibility with those who doubt it. We should recognise, for example, that heroic figures in pre-

historical folklore and even in historical times died and were routinely deified, as were the legendary Hercules and the entirely historical Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and his (adopted) son, Augustus Caesar, who thus became *divi filius*, Son of God. His temples and religious cults were set up all over the Roman empire as a focus of loyalty to the state. For his devoted followers to deify Jesus in the same way would have seemed natural enough, possibly essential, to the early Church leaders, as a challenge to the imperial cult of Augustus. That such deification was ridiculed by educated men even in those ancient times, when it could be very unsafe to do so, can be seen in the writing of the younger Seneca, adviser to the emperor Nero. (Ultimately forced by him for other reasons to commit suicide in 65 AD.) He wrote an entertaining skit on the deification of Nero's predecessor, Claudius, called the Apocolocyntosis *Divi Claudii*, the Gourdification or Pumpkinification of the Divine Claudius, a mockery of apotheosis, the process by which dead Roman emperors were routinely deified.

John Milton, a champion of Protestantism in his own times, suggests that 'silencing the expression of an opinion is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.' Jonathan Sacks, in support of this statement also quotes the great Islamic thinker, Ibn Rushd, who argued that you should always, when presenting a philosophical argument, cite the views of your opponents. Failure to do so is an implicit acknowledgement of the weakness of your own case. Curbing the words of an opponent is nothing but the curbing and enfeebling of religion itself.

Problems of belief and mythology have interested me ever since I first read Fraser's *Golden Bough* and Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Humankind has always been a teller of stories and in every nation and tribe there ever was folklore is the origin, and possibly the basis, of its beliefs. But in all our contemporary religious discussions, God, not Jesus or Religion (of whatever kind), is the Elephant in the Room. When RS Thomas calls God 'That Great Absence', he seems to me closer to a possible truth than the visionary programmes of action (so called) of modern church leadership. The great priority of the twenty-first century Christian community should be the search for God, not for numbers, activities, or new forms of worship, however desirable they may seem.

Emile Durkheim who died a hundred years ago next year wrote an early classic on the evolution of the early forms

of religion. It is not an easy argument to follow, but, if I understand him, he suggests that religion finds its origin, not in any divine revelation to mankind, but as the recognition in early prehistoric tribal groups of a collective force or social power, which transcended both the primitive individualism which motivated the hunter gatherers, and the simple group identity of families which were the earliest forms of human community. It found expression in totemism, which led to the first manifestation and awareness of social entities. At the beginnings of society religion and the totem become the symbolic religious representation of the community, and for Durkheim a clear indication that 'religion is the collective represented in symbolic form.'

He argues: 'If the totem is at once the symbol of the god and society are not the god and society one and the same?' In fact, as a general principle, divinity is society transformed and conceived symbolically, and religion is a set of beliefs and practices by which that society represents itself to itself. God is a figurative expression of society. If we depend on God, that is a symbolic expression of our sense of dependence on society. In short, 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibition – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community.'

Thus for Durkheim God, the sense of Divinity, comes second to social identity; the worship of God is not the earliest manifestation of religion – indeed some religions remain to this day without a God, but share all the necessary elements by which we can define religion. He would then suggest that religion is not only beliefs and practices which attach to the idea of the sacred, but also those beliefs and practices that help unite its adherents in a single moral community. In fact, as he argues in his own introduction, 'religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rituals are ways of acting that are generated only within each assembled group and are meant to stimulate and sustain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. But if these categories of thought have religious origins, they must participate in what is common to all religious phenomena: they must be social things, the product of

collective thought.' Or, to put it more simply, as one loyal member of my own congregation once expressed it to me, 'I come to church to express my sense of the community at least as much as out of any sense of God.'

Can one argue perhaps that there is nothing here incompatible with what we know of Jesus' teaching from the synoptic gospels? Yes, he had a profound sense of the sacred, the holy, the divine, and what he and his contemporaries called God. Yet his teaching was largely directed to the right conduct of life in relation to our neighbours; it offered particularly to the deprived and exploited a way of coping with the exigencies of life by mutual support – a sort of Ideal (not Marxist) Communism. And to this end he invoked the power of the divine. He did not imply that God would intervene to solve human difficulties; rather that a sense of our own communal moral obligation to each other would help us to help ourselves. To that end he told stories and coined memorable phrases and images about God, as well as invoking the remembered past of his nation to reinforce his teaching for a troubled present.

That surely is the role of mythology and legendary history. It is the way in which human societies remind themselves of the shared social values by which they have survived and developed. Folklore becomes legend becomes myth becomes religion. And religion is the cement of society; the idea of God the embodiment of our sense of all that is sacred. Whether God exists or not, there is no denying the power of the God-idea.



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**Brian Wilson** is a retired head teacher, author of several books (including *Lost Certainties*), and analysed the results of the '8 points' consultation for PCN Britain.



# Introducing: Robin Meyers

**After the inaugural Marcus Borg lecture's success, that Diana Butler Bass delivered on behalf of PCN Britain, Modern Church, St Marks CRC and Free to Believe, in 2017 we are establishing this tradition by inviting Robin Meyers to share the second on our behalf.**

**He is the author of seven books, and will be joining Dominic Crossan in continuing the series of books begun in partnership with Marcus Borg. He has also been asked by Marcus' widow, Marianne, to help set up the Marcus Borg Foundation.**

Dr. Robin Meyers is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, the Distinguished Professor of Social Justice at Oklahoma City University, a best-selling author, a columnist, and an award-winning commentator for National Public Radio. He has been the Senior Minister of Mayflower Congregational UCC church of Oklahoma City for 31 years, the fastest growing UCC church in the Kansas Oklahoma conference.

## It's a Mystery, Kid

I was a tow-headed twelve-year-old preacher's kid and Sunday school was not optional. My teacher was Mr. Nigh, a salt-of-the-earth but slightly grim Calvinist holding forth in a stuffy classroom at the Riverside Church of Christ in Wichita, Kansas. He was teaching us about forgiveness,



expounding on Peter's question to Jesus in Matthew 18:21 about how many times a person should be expected to forgive another person before the warranty runs out. My mind was elsewhere.

It was 1964 and The Beatles were coming. President Kennedy was buried beneath an eternal flame at Arlington marking the end of Camelot. The Warren Commission reassured us that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Nelson Mandela had just been thrown in prison, and Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to give cover to an escalation in the Vietnam War. Three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi in the time it took to sneak a peak at the latest issue of Playboy. On my father's desk was a copy of Bishop John A.T. Robinson's explosive little book, *Honest to God*. The earth seemed to be moving under everyone's feet.

Everyone that is, except my Sunday school teacher. He was explaining Jesus' answer to Peter's question as if

there was nothing particularly unusual about it. 'Seventy times seven really means an unlimited number of times,' he told the class. 'Peter was looking for a number, as if human beings can calculate the mathematics of forgiveness. Jesus will have nothing to do with placing limits on forgiveness. Any questions?'

The class was silent, which was nothing new. We were, after all, a clammy and restless collection of bony pre-adolescents who did not want to be there to begin with. Mostly we were collecting gold attendance stars in what other students complained was a rigged contest—given that I lived in a parsonage next door to the church. Besides, who wants to argue with Jesus?

Mr. Nigh paused to look up at us over his thick glasses. I suddenly realized that not only did they make his eyes huge, but they were speckled with tiny white flakes of dandruff. He repeated his question as if perhaps we had missed the radical nature of the text. 'Unlimited forgiveness boys—that is the lesson. Any questions?'

That's when it happened. That's when I realized that I did have a question. Who knows where it came from, or why I felt compelled to ask it. Maybe the idea of unlimited forgiveness sounded good, but did it apply to Hitler? I also knew that Mr. Nigh believed in a literal heaven and hell, and that all of us would spend eternity in one place or the other. That's why the question seemed so obvious to me, although I felt my face grow hot when I asked it.

'Mr. Nigh, if God is recommending unlimited forgiveness to us, then why would God not practice what Jesus preaches?' My Nigh looked confused, so I continued. 'Isn't the idea of a final judgment and unlimited forgiveness incompatible? An awkward silence followed. 'I mean, if unlimited forgiveness is the lesson, then wouldn't God forgive us all one last time and send everyone to heaven?'

More silence. I immediately regretted what I had said. I'm sure it sounded flippant and besides I was just a kid. But it didn't make sense to me, and my assumption was that God is at least as logical as I am, not less. What's more, I wanted Mr. Nigh to know that like all good Church of Christ kids, I was taking the text seriously.

When he finally got around to saying something, Mr. Nigh offered that familiar explanation heard countless times in the church when something doesn't make sense, even to a child. 'It's a mystery Robin. Perhaps it is not for us to question God, but to have faith.'

As we gathered up our things and shuffled out of class, it was dawning on me that certain religious questions could not be asked, especially if they were about God. More questions followed, of course, as did more answers that made no sense. Then I learned that if you ask too many questions, they start calling you a 'doubting Thomas.' Yet we are commanded to love God

with all our heart, soul, and mind. So if things don't make sense, we should say so, and be willing to think in new ways. Including the ways in which we were all raised to think about God, talk about God, and communicate with God.

### **Above Us Only Sky**

What has changed since the mid-twentieth century is the willingness of people to discuss the last taboo: theism itself. If not the death of God, then the death of patience when it comes to outdated models, and to many, offensive language about God. Parents expect every child to outgrow myths about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, but the Invisible Holy Father from childhood remains. Taught to use critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning in all other matters, countless adults are asked to partition their brain when it comes to religion. Otherwise reasonable adults now find it difficult to admit that ideas about God left over from antiquity makes it impossible for them to go to church, synagogue, or mosque. They live a quiet lie that they are ashamed to admit: that going to religious services means believing things they know are not true in order to get rewards they doubt are available.

Meanwhile we still pray as if involved in a transaction with a divine agent. We still give thanks to God when someone is spared in a plane crash no matter how many others perish. If God is in the business of saving one, then why not go ahead and save them all? We still talk about 'no atheists in a foxhole' as if God is the Rescuer of Last Resort. God is a personal bodyguard for some, an angry hit man for others. This selective providence makes God into a capricious monster, assumed to act on behalf of the chosen child while implying that other children deserves to die.

Meanwhile in our political life, our protest rallies are littered with signs that turn God into a political partisan, saying hooray for our side. As it turns out, belief in God and Willy Loman have a lot in common. When a critic was reviewing Arthur Miller's powerful play, *Death of a Salesman*, she wrote, 'we watched an aging, defeated traveling salesman move inexorably toward self destruction, clinging desperately to fantasies.' She is talking about Loman, of course. But today she could also be talking about orthodoxy views of God.

Everywhere we turn these days, someone is making a claim on behalf of a Deity that we rightly confess is beyond knowing or naming as if God is our next-door neighbour. Countless believers talk about the Almighty as one would talk about a vending machine, a rich uncle, or a lobbyist. The shameless way in which human beings conscript God for their own selfish purposes has done as much damage to the idea of God as the problem of evil itself.

### **The Ground is Shifting**

For two millennia, Christian theologians have made Jesus the focus of their work, and rightly so. Defenders of orthodoxy as well as those who seek to recover the historical Jesus have produced countless resources. But where does one go these days to have an honest conversation about what in the world people mean when they use the word 'God' in the first place? Or Yahweh or Allah, or whatever name is used in any religious tradition for the divine? We argue over whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch, whether Jesus was divine, or if Mohammad was really channelling words outside of himself. But we stop short of questioning the First Cause to begin with. Now we may be entering a time in which the questions will be more about God than about the prophets of God. More about what is revealed than about the revealer. It is almost as if there has been a kind of quiet conspiracy growing among people who struggle to be spiritual but cannot escape the most important question of all: What if the God of all our traditions does not 'exist' as other things exist? What if, in fact, the idea of God 'existing' at all is absurd, but not the only option?

**Robin Meyers**

## **How I Became A Heretic - With Help From Jesus**

**The Second Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture**  
Saturday 13 May 2017

**Robin Meyers**

St. Stephen's Church, Bristol, BS1 1EQ  
10:30-4:00pm

£20 for PCN members and £30 for non-members  
Tickets are now on sale and can be purchased online  
at the PCN Britain website:

[www.pcnbritain.org.uk/shop](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/shop) and select Tickets.

**01594 516528** [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## **Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved community of Resistance**

Monday 15th May, 7pm, St Thomas the Martyr  
Church, Haymarket, Newcastle upon Tyne.

**Robin Meyers**

£10 for PCN members, £8 for non, £5 for students  
[www.pcnbritain.org.uk/shop](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/shop) and select Tickets.

**01594 516528** [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk)

*Robin Meyers is one of the leading voices for progressive Christianity in the United States. As a pastor, writer, and speaker, he advocates passionately for a more just and generous Christian faith ... a faith that engages with racism, climate change, religious pluralism, economic inequality, and war. I respect him for his insight, his boldness, and his commitment to the deepest core of vital Christian faith.* **Brian McLaren**

# News from 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 meet on the first Tuesday of the month at 7.30pm, normally at St Michael's Church Room, Park Road, Abingdon, OX14 1DU. Recently we have used recordings of Adrian Alker's series of talks, 'Jesus Shaped Church – Christian Shaped Lives' as discussion starters, and will be contributing to a service led by one of our members in Jan. We shall be continuing this focus on a Church for the future in the New Year looking at material produced by CANA (Christians Awakening to a New Awareness) in 'Exploring Ways Forward For Christianity Into the Twenty-First Century' ([www.christiansawakening.org/contact/resources/](http://www.christiansawakening.org/contact/resources/)).

## Birmingham

Richard Tetlow

0121 4494892 richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk

Brian Parr, a long-standing group member, has written the following: Communication is all very well internally between Trustees, and local groups via Trustees (we are fortunate to have a trustee in our group), and also via PV and the Chair's Update, but external communication to the general public is probably lacking. People I talk to have little knowledge of what PCN stands for. How do we achieve greater publicity into the pews? When we discuss the reasons for PCN they are usually theologically based and it is this that does not get through into church. How we do this

seems to be the problem.

We recognise that probably all groups have this problem – Trustees too - but we offer this as a grass roots question for all of us to take up afresh as far as we can.

## Bolton

Jim Hollyman

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Our thinking is continuing to be challenged this year by Richard Holloway's book 'Doubts and Loves'. What he has tried to do in the book 'is to reclaim three revolutionary elements from what is left of the spirit of Jesus – i.e. to uncover the challenge of Jesus to human systems that are allowed to harden into tyrannous absolutes; to point to the angry pity of Jesus and the endless challenge of social hope; to look at forgiveness – the most distinctive of Jesus' teachings'. He says 'the issue is .... can we discover new ways of using the Christian tradition that will deepen our humanity, our care for the earth and for one another.' Our meetings are on the second Wednesday of each month at 1.30pm until approximately 3pm. They are held at 1462 Junction Road West, Lostock, Bolton, BL6 4EG. We continue to meet on 1st and 3rd

## Cardiff, Pontprennau

Jane Hexter

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Tuesday of each month at 7.30pm at Pontprennau community church. This term John Henson enthralled us with the topic of 'nudity in the bible', Andy Vivian came as a guest speaker, advising us about changes in progressive Christian thinking and leading a great discussion, and one of our members gave a personal testimony: 'journey to uncertainty' which again sparked a lot of discussion.

We also enjoyed a social event in a member's house.

Our big excitement was to hold Cardiff's first large event hosting Brian McLaren. About 120 people attended and the evening was a great success.

We continue to plan more interesting evenings, and all visitors are very welcome.

## Edinburgh

Mary McMahon

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A common thread has emerged from members' choice of topics this session. The group reconvened in Sept with a talk by Jim Mein, who helped us to explore the viability of hope both on our faith journey as well as in grappling with a range of current world concerns. It was good to aim for a perspective which seeks positive angles in responding to what are some urgent and challenging issues. In Oct we will tackle ways of surviving in what is, for many, a climate of disillusion with a church reluctant to change - 'Life-support in the wilderness.' In Nov we will be asking 'What is the point of religion?' as we focus on deepening our awareness of why we've chosen the journey of faith, to be people of the Way. In Dec the theme continues with the question 'Is God a myth?', followed, as always, by a celebratory glass of wine/juice and a mince pie!

## Exeter

Liz Vizard

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Some of us enjoyed Brian McLaren's visit on 9th Oct to Exeter. The afternoon attracted a large audience, many from local churches who were not members of PCN or our group, and from a wide age range including, unusually, a number of younger men. He gave two stimulating talks, with good question sessions following. On reflection this was not new thinking to PCN people, but Brian sets his thinking very helpfully in the historical context of violent and hateful actions of the church over centuries and then led on to how we read and interpret the Bible. His emphasis was on the loving spirit of Christ rather than assent to certain beliefs. Thanks are due to the PCN trustees who organised his visit.



**Manchester** John Ramsbottom  
0161 456 5119 john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk

We held a successful meeting in Manchester cathedral as part of the Brian McLaren tour in October with an attendance of about 150. Following on from this, we will be using some material by Brian entitled 'Everything must change'. This poses some very serious questions and follows many of the themes raised in his talk. After a Christmas break (no Dec meeting) we start the new year with a visit from Adrian Alker who will be speaking about his book 'Is a radical church possible?'. For this we will join with Grove Lane Baptists and meet at their premises in January. A couple of members have offered to lead discussions in subsequent months, which will be interspersed with the McLaren material. Unfortunately we have lost some members due to them moving out of the area, through ill health, or other commitments, so numbers are reduced and we would welcome more people to join us. Meetings are generally on the 4th Wednesday of the month at Heaton Moor United church in Stockport.

**Market Harborough** Jill Cooper  
01858 433865 jill.cooper@pcnbritain.org.uk

We continue to meet every 4 to 6 weeks on a Sunday evening, when our group of up to 12 lively minds share our thoughts and experiences on a topic decided at the previous meeting. We often stimulate discussion by bringing along book reviews, images or music that have enlightened or provoked us, most recently an edited transcript of the first of this year's Reith Lectures linking identity to faith and religion. This was germane to an enquiry into how much we can share with people of other faiths. 22nd Oct saw us together with the Oadby group and other visitors enjoying a very successful half-day conference led by Adrian Alker in his relaxed, creative and interactive style. Is a radical church possible? Well ... was Jesus a radical? There is your answer, it seemed to us! The

conference was dedicated to Gerald Gardiner, the late leader of the Oadby group, who had initiated the event but sadly did not live to participate in it.

**Newcastle** Pat Fuller  
01670 519800 pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk

When a group of us met in June to plan the themes for our next monthly sessions, we had few ideas of what would come out of our discussions. Then someone suggested we look at multi-faith issues, and ethics from a progressive Christian position. Now we have been 'en-couraged' by the Brian McLaren event which attracted about 140 participants, with over 100 not being members of PCN. Most of our group bought his book, 'Spiritual Migration'. It is an excellent read and puts the progressive Christian agenda in a coherent way. We will consider our reactions to what he said at a session. Then some of the Newcastle group are going to hear Rev'd Dr Robert Reiss and they will lead a session on what they hear to stimulate discussion.

In Jan we look forward to Rev'd Catherine Lack, Newcastle University Co-ordinating Chaplain. presenting her thoughts on, 'Multi-faith Chaplaincy – virtual dream or pragmatic reality'. The university has a diversity of nationalities and religions so Catherine seems a great person to share her thoughts on working in a multicultural and multi-faith environment. In Feb we will welcome the Rev'd Dr Carla Grosch-Miller, who, on her retirement as a URC minister, has come to live in the north east. The title of her presentation is 'Faith that matters – connecting belief and being, theology and ethics. These are exciting times for PCN Newcastle and we say thanks to all who worked so hard to organise Brian's tour. It has certainly put us on the map.

[www.pcnbritain.org.uk/  
locations/groups](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/locations/groups)

**N Worcester** Mary Kenchington  
07804 015576 mlimpetk@gmail.com

I'm happy to report some developments since Sept; the brainstorm at our Oct meeting generated enough ideas for future topics to keep us busy for quite a while. We gained another prospective new member, and we've decided that we'd enjoy more bring-and-share meals! Much more significantly, Adrian Alker has agreed to come to talk with us in March about his book 'Is a Radical Church Possible?' and, no doubt, many related matters. Hopefully we will be able to invite others in the region to join us, numbers and space permitting. For more information nearer the time do contact me. Meantime, at 2.30pm on 24th Nov in Hagley, we shall be introduced to (or reminded of) some of Dave Tomlinson's ideas, courtesy of Youtube, preceded by refreshments and followed by discussion.

**Richmond** Alan Powell  
0208 878 7355 alanepowell@blueyonder.co.uk

We have been exploring Dave Tomlinson's 'Re-enchanting Christianity' and found it both refreshing and challenging. The dates and topics of further meetings will be posted on the website.

**Shoreline** (Norfolk Broads) Julia Morris  
01692 598538 julia.morris2@btinternet.com

We meet every Thursday at 2.00pm in a member's house. Between us we attend various Churches and none. We are currently using the DVD 'Beyond Theology' to help our explorations and engender conversations (not difficult!). The Gretta Vosper hearings in Canada are giving us much food for thought and prompting discussion on defining our understanding of life and love without using hackneyed phrasing. The outcomes will be instructive, not to say, life-changing. All these inputs engender and feed our discussions along with local and national events and the Church press. We take time to share and support one another through life's joys and challenges. We relish the

freedom to share, question, disagree, learn and laugh together.

**Stirling** (Forth Valley) Jon Cape  
07577 564092 jon.cape@pcnbritain.org.uk

We continue to meet roughly every six weeks at 17 Kenilworth Road, Bridge of Allan, with around 10-12 participants. Each evening has been led by a member and based on a book or film. In Sept we discussed Adrian Alker's 'Is a Radical Church Possible?' which created lively debate we were pleased to continue when he came to Stirling in Oct. The material was stimulating and we appreciated the chance to break out into discussion groups. It was good to welcome three from Edinburgh, and we also had a visitor from 'north of Perth' who caused some consternation at the end of the meeting by proclaiming damnation on us and pretty much the whole world, unless we were protected by the seven angels who were already protecting him and others in Midnight Ministries. He had his own idea of what a radical church would look like but safe to say it wasn't what the rest of us had been discussing all evening!

**Stoke On Trent** Nigel Jones  
01782 632895 nigel.jones@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our meeting about Richard Dawkins was followed by a look at Nietzsche, who wrote 'God is Dead'; Geoff Locke gave us a brief outline of his life and work which gave rise to some deep questions. It was noted that Nietzsche did not quite live up to his Nihilistic beliefs, leaving us thinking that nobody can. You can see a summary of this and other talks on the bulletin section of our pages on the PCN website. I led two meetings in which I attempted to summarise what Marcus Borg writes in 'The Heart of Christianity'. The first was about the Bible and about God, and the second was Jesus and Born Again; which provoked an enjoyable discussion. Marcus strongly argues that all four of these are essential to Christianity, but rejects what has become their traditional interpretations. He emphasises a

living faith, not a set of beliefs and takes a metaphorical, sacramental approach to the Bible. Born Again (Born of the Spirit) is the positive alternative to that of a hard belief in Jesus dying for our sins. Our other meeting was different; Angela Glendenning, a local activist, presented a talk and slides highlighting the oppressed life of the Palestinians, together with a potted history of the establishment of the state of Israel. One of the questions was whether the problems are all the result of a theology which grossly favours the Jews, coupled with some Christians' view that domination by the Jews will eventually lead to the second coming of Christ? Our next meeting will be about Christmas, as we eat mince pies.

**Tunbridge Wells** Pat Churchill  
01892 531541 pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our meetings are generally on the last Tuesday of the month. (Do ring to check time and venue.) We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course. In Sept a number of us attended the launch of Mark Oakley's 'The Splash of Words' in Tunbridge Wells, which led us away from the cerebral and into the world of feelings.

This led to the next two meetings titles being 'Our ideas and experience of God' - whatever that means for each of us. At the first, in a local cafe with an events area, each member was invited to say something about this as an introduction, using poems, music etc., if they wished, and we listened to each other. This then opened up to a general discussion. In Oct, at our usual venue, members shared their experiences of when God, variously and often vaguely defined, felt very close. These were both shared experiences and losing oneself in the flow of creation. Nov meeting will start with poetry and we will see where it leads us. On Sat 7th Jan we will meet for our New Year lunch at a local cafe followed by a walk on Rusthall Common if weather permits.



## Membership Survey 2016

247 responses were received and I would like to thank everyone who completed the survey. Full results will be available online and by email or post from January.

The age profile of PCN shows that the majority of our members are of retirement age, but this was not unexpected. The Trustees are looking at some ideas to widen our appeal to younger people in order to strengthen the organisation and protect its future; hopefully we will have news of these initiatives for you soon.

One clear message is that although many members are happy to pay by Direct Debit, many are not. There will be no requirement for members to change how they pay and all existing methods of payment will remain available. Direct Debit will be an additional option from 2017.

There were many comments including praise, suggestions and requests, for which we are very grateful. Overall the comments were positive, which was encouraging. PV was singled out for many compliments and votes of thanks.

The Trustees have been shown the full results of the survey and are looking to act upon them. We have been asked for progressive liturgy and I am pleased to say that there is already a group working on that.

Thank you for taking part, you have given us a lot to think about.

**Sarah Guilfoyle**, PCN Britain Administrator

# Common Dreams

## Sharing Common Dreams Down Under!

Australia, whose aboriginal peoples were successively overwhelmed in numbers by colonists, convicts, settlers and immigrants of all kinds, has been a land both of opportunity and new beginnings; but also of fear and protectionism. Only in 1973 did the federal government abolish the White Australia policy but there has been a centuries old ambivalence to the 'stranger in our midst'.

In 2005, in the beach-side suburb of Cronulla in Sydney, serious race riots erupted between young men of different racial backgrounds. Why is all this relevant? Because these riots spurred a group of like-minded progressive church-going folk to come together to discuss the idea of a national conference, inviting participants to dream of a better future beyond the differences of race, ethnicity and religion. And so the first 'Common Dreams' conference took place in Sydney in 2007, followed by conferences in Melbourne in 2010, Canberra in 2013 and this year in Brisbane. Common Dreams is sponsored by an alliance of Australian and New Zealand kindred organisations, representing streams of progressive religious thought and action.

As chair of PCN I was delighted to attend the Brisbane conference with my wife Christine and to experience the warmth, generosity and kindness of our Australian hosts.

The context for the progressive Christian movement in Australia and New Zealand is not dissimilar to the UK. The 2011 census reveals that 61% of Australians classify themselves as Christian whilst weekly attendance at church is about 7.5% (a little higher than in the UK). Church congregations are ageing in the historic denominations of Anglicanism and Protestantism, but the Roman Catholics are still the most numerous of Christians with 25% of all Christians identifying as Catholic and 21% of all schoolchildren educated in Catholic schools. The newer churches, often charismatic and fundamental, can attract the younger devotees but in that 2011 census almost a third of all people aged under 34 chose the option of 'no religion'. The call of the surf rather than the pew on Sunday morning?

350 people gathered for the fourth Common Dreams Conference which addressed the theme of 'Progressive Spirituality – New Directions.' I guess the age profile of most attendees was of the 'third age' but a parallel programme for the 'emerging generations' was on offer.

The conference took place in a Uniting Church Girls High School (a private school), very well resourced and close to the conference hotel. The main speakers included Val Webb and Diana Butler Bass, now well known to PCN Britain members but also Fred Plumer who heads up the progressive network in the USA, Dave Felton, the brains behind 'Living the Questions' and many others. There was a programme of electives to choose from and I was asked to speak to the themes of my book on Radical



Church to an enthusiastic audience of about 80 in total. You may like to listen to all the main speakers at the conference by visiting [www.commondreams.org.au](http://www.commondreams.org.au) and click on conference proceedings in the menu.

Where PCN Britain leads so others follow ... and so I listened to and enjoyed the Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture given by Diana Butler Bass – a different lecture than the Birmingham one (!) – but this time prefaced in person by Marianne Borg. (Pictured with Adrian and Christine.) What a delight to meet Marianne in person and to have long breakfast conversations with her about Marcus and the foundation she is setting up in his name.

There is much to be hopeful for in this land of great opportunity and beauty. 85% of the 24 million population live in the vibrant and well-resourced coastal urban areas. A Christianity for their world will speak into a culture where there is a freedom of expression over matters of sexuality, an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-racial society which seeks to shake off some of the prejudices of the past, and acknowledges that the land upon which they stand belongs to its aboriginal peoples. Some of this spirit permeated the conference and those who attended it, sharing their Common Dreams.

It was privilege to be invited and this gave Christine and myself the opportunity after the conference had finished to fly first to Sydney and then on to Perth to meet with cousins and their families, whom we have really only known through Christmas card greetings.

The progressive Christian movement is alive and well 'down under' and I hope we can journey together in different ways, supporting each other and learning from each other in the years ahead.

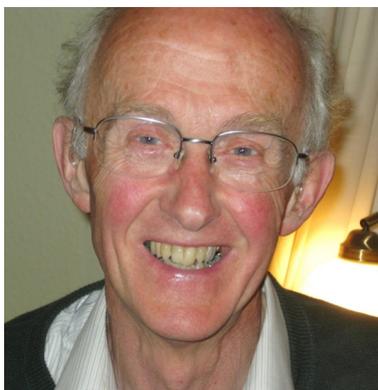


**Adrian Alker** serves as the  
Chair of PCN Britain  
[adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

# Introducing

## Richard Tetlow

PCN Britain trustee



Family: complex parents, born 3rd out of 6 brothers and sisters; married Ruth in 1970, and we have 3 adult children and 3 young grandchildren.

Interests: life and education, family, most sport, music and singing (CBSO till lately) and playing the violin, walking hills big and little, politics, CND, and gardening.

Early education:

School: Harrogate Grammar 1953-61; Trinity College, Cambridge, M.A. History, followed by progressive theological awakening, 1963-66, via Clinical Theology, 'Honest to God', 'True Wilderness' and 'Soundings' plus vacation work in Dresden, New York and Durban, and a dissertation on 'Slavery'.

Professional education: Postgraduate diplomas in Social Studies and Applied Social Studies. Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, Sheffield and London universities, 1966/7 and 1972/3

Grass roots experience of living and working in inner-city Southwark, 1967-76; including case and community worker based on Settlement life and work

Tutor and lecturer in Social casework, group and community work, Lancaster University, 1976-81

Ordination training for the Anglican ministry at Queen's College, Birmingham, 1981-83. Curate at city centre church of St Martin's in the Bull Ring; vicar of St John's (and St Peter's) Church, inner-city Ladywood, 1989-2008, a racially-mixed congregation which we redeveloped from a big, into a big, and beautiful, church.

Post-retirement in 2008 I remain a voluntary licensed Anglican priest with a roaming brief; convenor Moseley and Highgate Inter Faith Forums, and PCN Birmingham

Theological activity: writing, reading and study on 'Inter faith', especially relating to progressive Christianity.

Continuing life journey: bridge-building in what I understand of God's name.

# PCN AGM

## PCN BRITAIN ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING A BIG CONVERSATION

For many organisations like PCN, the AGM can feel slightly routine, a little dull perhaps, an occasion for thanks and to check out how we are faring financially. In recent years we have placed the AGM in the larger context of a day conference, as in Leeds and London. The disadvantage of this is a feeling of being rushed and adding to the idea of a necessary but not overwhelmingly interesting interlude.

The PCN trustees have agreed that in 2017 the AGM will be different! We would like this to be an opportunity to have a **big conversation with members from all parts of our network** and from as many groups as possible. The life of PCN is what happens in all the communities of the UK where PCN is trying to make a difference – and we want to hear about all of these experiences. What are the good things going on in your group or church? Lets talk about the good events you've held, the interesting speakers, the compelling reads.

And so on **Saturday April 1st** – no fooling!- at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, where one of our trustees is a chaplain, we are inviting you to gather, yes for an AGM but much more. We will offer one or two 'workshops' such as how you might make better use of the website and how to better your PR. We will have resources on show. Above all we want you to have a chance to tell the trustees and each other about your hopes for the future of PCN.

We really want this to be a great afternoon and so the trustees are also willing to offer to reimburse travel costs for one person to attend from every group - or to share such a reimbursement. You can have lunch in the hospital canteen or bring your own.

The details again:

**Saturday 1st April 2017**  
**12.30 – 4.00pm**  
**Queen Elizabeth Hospital,**  
**Mindelsohn Way, Birmingham**  
**B15 2TH**

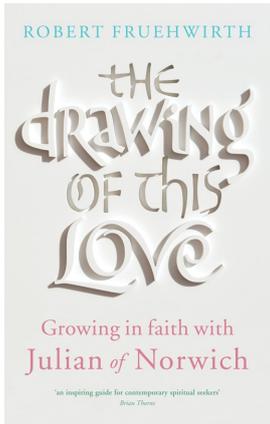
Travel from New St Station for 10 mins to University Station on the Cross City Line

Please book the date in your diary now and after Christmas you will be invited to complete a booking form so we know how many to expect.

Adrian Alker

# Reviews

## The Drawing of this Love by Robert Fruehwirth, Canterbury Press



Fruehwirth makes clear that Julian's words 'All shall be well' have allowed people to find hope and peace in crises but that Julian questioned how the world's suffering

could be made well. She continually found what might now be called the 'universalist' content of her visions at variance with the Church's Christocentricism. He puts these approaches clearly and gives us her answers, but it remains difficult to find a satisfactory resolution for those who question traditional catholic teaching. He awkwardly uses 'Godself' to avoid gender based language.

The first part explores Julian's direct experience of God and what it tells us about the nature of her faith and how it challenges us as we seek to make this our own. Next her questioning of her experience, and struggle for more coherent understanding are the background to considering her psychological, therapeutic and theological reflections.

The final part focusses on Julian's meditations on Christian experience, and her advice to those seeking to live a life of faith in response to a God of love. As each part of the 'Revelations' is explored he makes clear his purpose is not to critique her writing but to help us grow in faith, to learn to trust in God's love, to pray through any resistance to it and be open to healing. He provides personal spiritual exercises at the end of each section which offer help as we face the blocks in our unconscious. They include a list of the 'Showings' so that we may discern which are most important to us; and reflecting on moments of transcendence and awareness of God's closeness. There is also helpful flexibility, for example, 'is Jesus still the centre of our faith or has this shifted to something else?' We are given a fresh way to enter into the profound, but not always easily understood, 'Revelations'. His

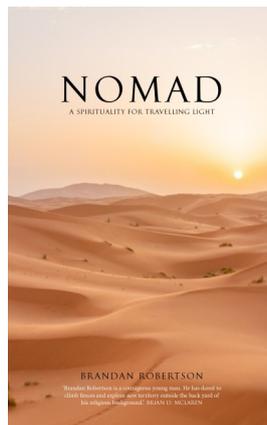
reflections on the hazelnut and the parable of the servant are thorough. We arrive at a place where, as Julian insists, God draws us into wholeness and openness. This then must be shown in lives where there is compassionate tenderness towards ourselves, one another, and God, whom Julian saw as desiring us and our loving response:

*I saw that God is our true peace, and our sure protector when we are not at peace in ourselves, and he works continually to bring us into endless peace. And so when we, through the working of mercy and grace, are made humble and gentle, we are completely safe. Suddenly the soul is united to God when it is truly at peace in itself, for no anger is to be found in God.*

Peter Varney

## Nomad by Brandan Robertson, Darton, Longman and Todd Limited

In the context of the USA this is a frank and honest autobiography of a journey from Christian fundamentalism to spiritual liberation. After suffering abuse in a dysfunctional home at the age of 12 he escaped to a fundamentalist church where he gave his life to Christ and accepted its doctrines wholeheartedly. He studied at a college of the same



persuasion, but here began to have doubts about what was being taught. By making his questioning public he brought condemnation on himself. As if this did not cause

difficulties enough, the realisation of his bisexuality added to his stress. He suffered depression and panic attacks. To resolve his confusion he turned to the Bible to understand homosexuality rather than contemporary ideas about his orientation. Needless to say, this made matters worse.

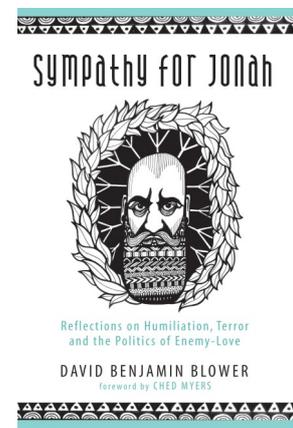
Nomad is the metaphor he uses to embody his subsequent progress from fundamentalism to spiritual liberation, from doctrine to striving for social justice. He was encouraged to discover 'that there is a whole caravan of people

who are walking and have walked this nomad journey'. Some parts of are repetitive, but it is an easy read.

While his self-discovery, deep thinking and painful experience may be interesting to Christian radicals, I feel it will be valuable reading for anxious fundamentalists with minds beginning to open to a more liberal and guilt-free faith, centred on social justice. It will also implicitly tell them to solve their problems not by opening the Bible, but by logging on to Google.

Robin Story

## Sympathy for Jonah by David Benjamin Blower, Wipf & Stock



The author is a musician who has been writing a musical based on the book of Jonah, and this book shows he has lived with the story for a long time.

He is critical of what he calls the version aimed at children which focuses on the whale; the real beast at the heart of the story is empire, in this case the Assyrian empire which could give even the worse examples of modern tyranny a run for their money when it comes to barbarism and cruelty. Consequently Jonah's running away from God's commission to go to Nineveh is not a Jewish anti-gentile sentiment (there's a powerful attack on those who have argued it is); it's a straightforward case of self-preservation.

There's a section arguing that Jonah's being swallowed by the whale represents humiliation and even rebirth (the word used for the fish is masculine, but the word used when Jonah is regurgitated is feminine). I was not entirely convinced, nor by his section on Nineveh's repentance which I've always found baffling, a bit too good to be true if Nineveh really was that bad.

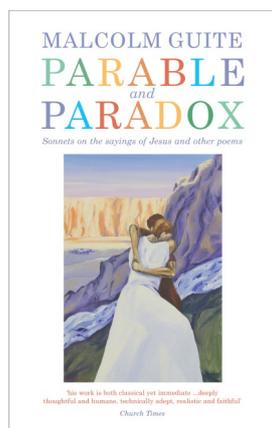
The real message of the book is that dialogue with enemies is nothing short of a divine command, and that means with all enemies, not just some.

There's also a powerful section reflecting on the fact that Jonah is never really reconciled either to his calling or the results of his ministry, if ministry it can be called. Dialogue with enemies exacts a real personal cost after which we're never really the same again.

In short a very interesting book; the effect is rather scatter gun, perhaps being a musician he is more inclined to jump from one idea to another rather than write systematically, but the book is none the worse for that and you can read it in less than an hour.

**Guy Whitehouse**

**The Parable and Paradox  
by Malcolm Guite, Canterbury Press**



Readers will come to this collection of poetry assured of Malcolm Guite's pedigree. Chaplain of Girton Cambridge, performance poet and prolific writer,

this collection is formed of three parts; 50 reflections on the sayings of Jesus, a collection of almost 30 short poems, and finally a brief 'kind of doxology', 'Seven Whole Days'. While each section has its own structure and inspiration, they share Guite's purpose to compose 'both for personal reading and use in liturgy and prayer'. These are not then poems of doubt and exploration, but sit within the mainstream of Christianity. Their power and novelty here rests not in their theology, but in dynamic use of language, in Guite's ability to phrase the epithet, the pithy summation of an idea or element of faith. In his words, his role is to strip off 'the familiar film' which covers so much of our Christian experience and 'pierce to the point'.

The best poems here are reminiscent of the intense compression and explosive power of Hopkins, sweeping and punching idea and image: 'To find my flow in him, my living source'.

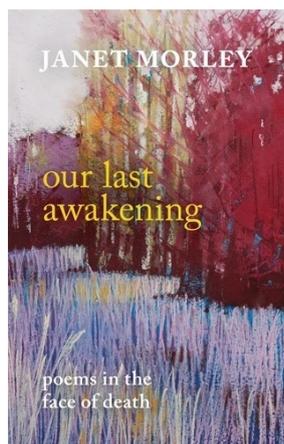
But mainly it was the tight phrase that struck me: 'unwrap me from my fear' (using the image of Lazarus' grave clothes) when meditating on Christ's challenges, or 'pitch his tent in our humanity' exploring refugees. Careful, dramatic construction and pacing lead often to sharp final couplets: 'Don't

count me with the strong and tanned and thin, Count me with the maimed, but count me in'.

So, although some poems might seem too deeply lodged in the vocabulary of orthodoxy to fully achieve Guite's aim of 'defamiliarising', his works provide plenty of accessible inspiration for liturgy, or indeed house group or personal reflection, and at their best, resonant, complex intensity.

**Andrew Lancaster**

**Our Last Awakening  
by Janet Morley, SPCK**



A collection of 50 poems written by many different poets, all concerning death - some may see the subject as depressing but the book certainly is not.

Janet believes that poetry can help us address the subject of death when our culture discourages us from talking about it openly. Whether we are facing our own death, or the death of someone close to us, poetry has a way of articulating thoughts and feelings that we struggle with.

The tone of the poems is varied, some are serious, some more light-hearted even humorous. Even when a poem touches a nerve raw with grief, just knowing someone else has experienced such feelings can be a comfort, and there is much here that is uplifting.

The book is divided into six sections and the poems explore the feelings we may experience at each stage:

Ordinary Mortality is concerned with facing the fact that our lives do not go on forever. 'The cycle of birth, growth, blossoming, ripeness, decay and death is ubiquitous and necessary'.

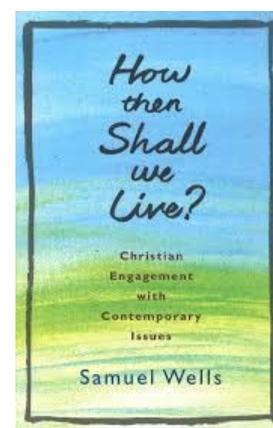
Fears and Fantasies includes our curiosity about death and the fear of the unknown. The section Actual Crisis explores how it feels to face a life-threatening situation. The final three sections are to do with bereavement. Immediate Grief contains poems which address the many emotions that come with loss - numbness, anger, guilt and pain. Remembering and Celebrating shows the importance of remembering

a life lived. The final section, Hope, has perhaps a more Christian aspect to it. The poems explore the idea of a future life after death, and the 'Christian hope and promise of a life with God that embraces us beyond death as well as during this life on earth'.

What I find particularly helpful in this book is that Janet Morley does not just present the poems one after the other. After each there is a thoughtful expansion of the poem's content and meaning, which really helps the reader get to grips with what the poet is saying. A book to dip into certainly, but also one which merits a deeper reading.

**Christine Clasper**

**How then Shall we Live?  
by Samuel Wells, Canterbury Press**



In the preface he admits that 'without a great deal of forward planning, I seem to have become a pastor, theologian, preacher, author, institutional leader and

broadcaster.' His breadth of experience and opportunity gives relevance and credibility, as he considers some of the most pressing contemporary political, social and moral issues that we face. They are presented with compassion, wisdom and a Christian imagination.

It is set out in three parts: Engaging the World, Being Human and Facing Mortality. Each examines a wide range of current issues: migration, ecology, social media, sexual identity, old age, dementia, assisted dying, obesity, inequality, religious extremism. Each is written in a different tone of voice. Sometimes it is probing and exploratory, sometimes pastoral, but never avoiding the questions that we wrestle with.

The sections can be read independently, so I immediately turned to that on dementia. In less than four pages, he manages to summarise the negative approach most people are familiar with and to turn it into a very positive, exciting new beginning, full of possibilities for the person with dementia and the carers. All of this was referenced in the Bible using the Greek word 'lou' meaning 'I loose'.

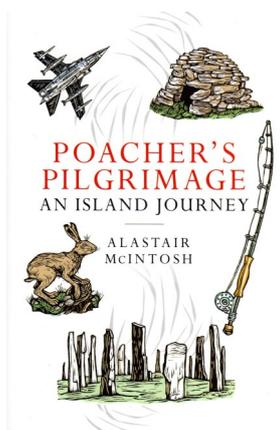
His language and structure make his ideas accessible to all, even the most challenging topics that require deep thought and understanding.

He writes that his book 'is written for those who find themselves in the wilderness today - a wilderness of living in a complex world, a wilderness of coping with a challenging life, a wilderness of facing the prospect of their own mortality.'

He challenges us never to lose sight of God's glory and to remember our many gifts, even if that is difficult at the time. God is closer to us at times of struggle. He finishes his introduction by saying, 'It is a book that seeks to renew faith, offer insight and stir to thoughtful action'. It certainly achieved that for me.

**Christine Holmes**

### **Poacher's Pilgrimage by Alastair McIntosh, Birlinn, Edinburgh**



The human ecologist, Alastair McIntosh is already established as one of Scotland's greatest living authors. Soil and Soul and Hell and High Water

achieved that a few years ago and, since then, *Island Spirituality* and *Spiritual Activism* (co-authored with Matt Carmichael) have kept the pot boiling.

His latest offering, *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, is a tour de force. If this was just a travel book, taking us on a journey up and around the hills and across and through the moorland and rivers of the islands of Harris and Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, it would be a wonderfully evocative story of a man revisiting his child-hood haunts and reminiscing about a past long gone, as he undertakes a twelve-day hike in one of Scotland's more remote parts.

This is more than just a travel book. It's a quest to find out what 'we're inside of ... an ecology of the imagination.' With McIntosh you always get more than you thought you'd bargained for. What learning, he reveals, in both depth and breadth as he takes us on a spiritual and mystical journey. Who else would be equally at ease (and equally accepted) discussing mutually assured destruction with the country's leading generals over

drinks at their staff college, or recalling the stories of the sith (the faerie tradition) and second sight with an elderly Presbyterian resident of the islands, living by paraffin lamp in her isolated cottage?

I read this book in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote and the publication of the report of the Chilcot inquiry into the UK's involvement in the Iraq war. Writing prior to these events, McIntosh's reflections on a leader's 'political paranoia', living out the myth of redemptive violence, seem prophetic. It seems that McIntosh, while immersed in the folk traditions and religious gravity of the Western Isles, simultaneously speaks to us about the most contemporary and pressing of issues. In exploring how the Cross might speak afresh to Christianity's third millennium, he doesn't shirk from challenging religion's association with, and co-option of, God (*Dieu et mon Droit*) in support of violence. Nor, from Christianity's continued absorption with legalism, so contrary, he argues, to the non-violent, loving message of Jesus, who spent his life suffering among the poor.

A theology of fear discredits any god of love, he writes, echoing the first letter of John. And yet, he speaks kindly of the military leaders he has known, so often more aware of the tragedy of war than their political masters. 'We all take up positions on a long front. None of us can quite see how it looks from the next person's post.'

We are, he argues, today faced with a colonisation of the soul, just as so many parts of the Outer Hebrides were colonised by the forces of Empire in the clearing of the land of its ancient peoples to make way for sheep-rearing. And violence: does it not come from the very cravings, the unresolved anxieties, which are at war within each of us?

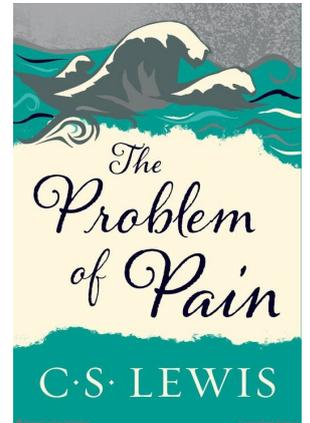
The last section presents more of a direct challenge to some fundamental religious thinking. It does so, not least, to the pivotal Calvinist notion of penal substitutionary atonement: namely, that Jesus was brutally murdered to relieve us of the consequences of divine wrath at our sin. That only works if the 'carriage of Christianity is drawn by an Old Testament warhorse'. He points towards the idea of liberation, forgiveness, the Cross as the supreme symbol of nonviolence. The Second Coming? It always is, always was, and always will be: Christ as cosmic enlightenment.

This is a book to savour, to ponder and to work with. McIntosh has given a lot of himself in writing it. He asks questions of himself and of us all. It merits immersion and much reflection.

**John Sturrock**

### **The Problem of Pain by C. S. Lewis, William Collins**

I read this in the context of a trip to the Highlands to remember a friend who had died in the hills, in the hope that it might offer some insight or comfort. I was disappointed.



Some of the philosophical arguments are unconvincing (one set of inferences starts from the premise that pre-Fall people had self-repairing bodies and required no sleep) and treating lines taken from the Bible out of context as authoritative is never going to go down well. My main concern was the lack of humanity. I was moved by his piety but I found something lacking in his attitude to human suffering. To him, pain is simply a device that God the Creator uses to remind us of our need for devotion to Him as his creatures. It is perhaps comparable to a minister visiting a bereaved family and offering a lecture on theology, rather than human sympathy. I wonder if the bachelor academic of 1940 could have imagined the widower of 1960 who wrote *A Grief Observed*? It doesn't contain any answers, just thoughts noted over weeks. It might be said that his view, at least in 1940, was an example of the promotion of pure idea over compassion in a tradition running, at its worst, through the Inquisition to modern terrorism.

Apart from being controversial, that comparison is probably unfair. His relationship to God seems to be more than an idea, even if his view of human life seems to reduce pain and grief to theological constructs.

One of John Robinson's views in *Honest to God*, if I have understood it correctly, is that some things matter in themselves. I prefer that.

**Duncan Craig**

# Syrian Christians & Muslims

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In September 2016, at the invitation of Christian and Muslim leaders, I led an unofficial group of seven people including two peers and one retired bishop, to make a pastoral visit to Syria. We travelled to listen, to learn; and to meet as many people as possible to gain a deeper understanding of the situation in Syria. We were also privileged to reach Aleppo – the first British group to do so since the start of the conflict.

My focus in this article will be that of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria. But I begin by acknowledging a criticism of this approach. Most Syrians say that they do not identify themselves by their religious or ethnic identity. First and foremost they say they are Syrian, and are proud of the plurality and diversity that that identity represents. A valid criticism of focusing on the religious dimension in Syria, is that it might exaggerate a sectarian divide in a society that has for generations celebrated its plurality, diversity and religious tolerance.

The context of Christianity and Islam in Syria is more complex and diverse than anywhere else in the Middle East. That Christianity has been in Syria since the earliest days of the Church is deeply rooted within the identity, the culture and the faith of the Christian communities in the country. Christianity is part of the fabric of Syrian society. Indeed, immediately prior to the rise of Islam, Christians formed the majority of the population. And during the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries of the Christian era, when Islam spread across the whole region, there was considerable engagement between Muslim, Christian and Jewish philosophers and theologians. In fact, Jewish and Christian writings and practices find echoes in the pages of the Qur'an, and in Muslim rituals. Jews, Christians and Muslims, along with other minority groups, lived in relative harmony in the Middle East until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Christianity in Syria consists of ancient Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches. These were impacted by western influence in the region, to create the Maronite, Catholic Melkite, Chaldean, Syrian, Coptic and Armenian Catholic churches, and later by Protestant Churches as well. This theological, doctrinal and ecclesial diversity created some division; but social, religious and political pressure on the Christian community has considerably reduced conflict between the denominations.

If anything, the Muslim community is even more diverse, with a broad spectrum of both Shi'a and Sunni faith represented. Several factors have affected the Christian/Muslim relationship in Syria in recent years. Among them, the growing influence of conservative Sunni Islam, versus the more progressive but secular Muslims who value the diversity of Syria's faith communities; and the battle between secularism and modernity versus the traditional 'sunna', and how this is lived out.

by a century of western interventionism in the region, and the perception amongst some Muslims that indigenous Christians belong to a 'western' faith, and are tainted by the violence, destabilisation and injustice, that have characterised the political actions of western 'players' perceived to have supported, or opposed, corrupt regimes only according to their own interests.

My experiences in Syria have been deeply moving. I have visited Syria five times since April 2014. During these visits, I have met with most senior Christian leaders and many Muslim leaders in the country; with local communities in towns and villages; with local community and political leaders – both internal opposition figures and members of the Government. I have also visited Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Iraq.

Throughout the country, and even in the face of huge trauma, there is remarkable resilience; a common wish to see the war end; and for realities on the ground to be accurately reported. (So much of what is reported in much of the western media is one-sided or misrepresents realities). Meanwhile, in the midst of conflict, Muslim and Christian communities in the Government-controlled areas where Islamist rebels have not destroyed churches or scattered the Christian communities, there is a sincere and intense effort by faith leaders to work together to serve their suffering communities and the internally displaced among them.

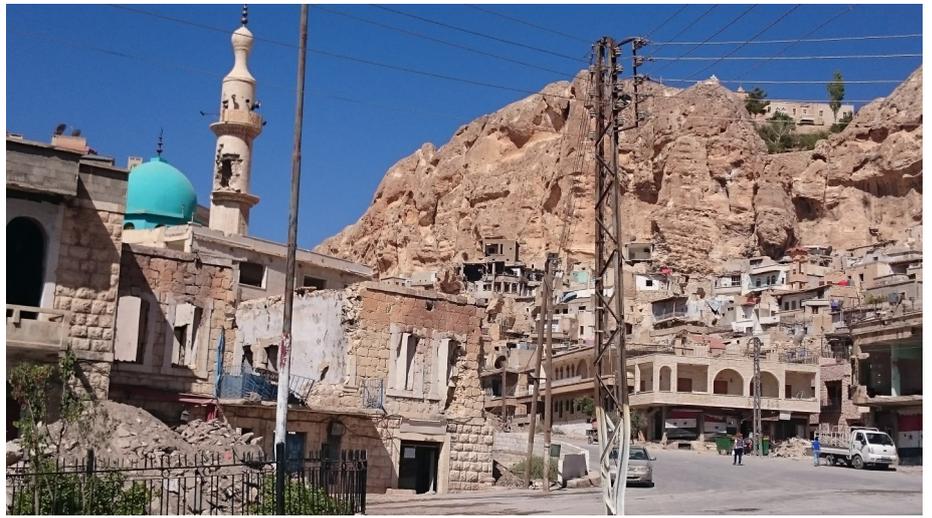
Two years ago, I attended a meeting of the Reconciliation Committee in Homs, one of many such committees in the country. Present were local Muslim and Christian clergy who work tirelessly to bring people of different factions together to try to achieve ceasefires, and to bring relief to their communities. Members of different faiths and factions were gathered in one room for discussion. As we stood in prayer at the end of the meeting, shells started falling and gun-battles erupted a few blocks away. One of the Sheikhs present that day was shot dead three weeks later, when he went to a rebel-controlled district to try to engage in dialogue with fighting factions there.

In Saidnaya last November, I attended a service in the historic Convent Church, where local Christians and Muslims gathered to honour members of the village who had died fighting rebel groups that had been attacking the town. Together, the local Sheikh and Bishop handed icons to families of the deceased. Today, the Muslim and Christian clergy meet weekly to consider shared action to serve their communities.

In Maaloula, the Christian Aramaic-speaking majority had lived peacefully with their Muslim neighbours for centuries. When the town was occupied by 'moderate rebels' in 2014 a number of Christians were murdered for their faith. Others were abducted and have not been seen since. Tragically, it is believed some Muslim

Centuries of 'status quo' have also been undermined

residents supported the extremists. Others supported their Christian neighbours and protected them. Today the town is badly damaged. The shrines, visited by pilgrims over the years, have been burnt and partially destroyed. But some of the residents who fled are returning, and a Christian MP who comes from the town, Maria Saadeh, is helping to ensure that both shrines and homes are already being restored. It will take a long time to rebuild trust, but the work has begun.



Last November, I spent a few days at a 7<sup>th</sup> Century Monastery near the Sunni/Christian village of Qara. The ISIS lines were just 3km west and 20km east. Each night was punctured by the crash of mortar fire and rattle of gunfire nearby. Yet, the monks and nuns have stayed, and the bells of the monastery ring out across the valley daily. When the village was occupied by ISIS for four months in 2014, the local Sunni Muslims protected the Christian villagers and smuggled food to the monastery. After ISIS were expelled from Qara, having badly damaged and defaced its ancient churches, the Muslim villagers helped their Christian neighbours to restore them.

Members of all communities around Syria lament the violence. They are terrified of what will happen if Islamist agendas prevail. And many support the Government and President. They wish for the pluralism and diversity of Syria to be restored and maintained. Syrian Christians have been speaking with an almost unanimous voice on political issues. They know that an Islamist regime could be catastrophic for the survival of the religious and cultural plurality of the country.

It would be easy to give up hope amidst the devastation of what has happened in Syria. But I have hope because so many Syrians are determined to survive and rebuild a plural, diverse country. It is time for the fighting to stop, and for a dialogue without preconditions to begin between all Syrian parties. And Syrians should be allowed by the international community to make their own choices.



I believe that Middle Eastern Christians, because of their long experience in the region, are well placed to reflect on the most effective ways of developing dialogue, hope, forgiveness, and a new understanding of what it means to be

Visiting Aleppo in September required a dangerous journey from Damascus, passing through miles of destroyed villages and towns, and passing within a few hundred metres of ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra lines. Despite the massive destruction that surrounds the city, the western part of the city is not destroyed. Here two million people live together and try to get on with life despite the constant rain of shells and bombs that fall randomly in the city from the rebels. In West Aleppo, most citizens are keen to see the terrorists defeated. We met with Christian and Muslim leaders in the city, all of whom questioned why the international community seems to be prioritising the voices of extremist militants over the cries and wishes of the majority of the people in the city. The Senior Doctors Council spoke of the media misrepresentation of the situation; and of the hospitals and schools that have been destroyed by the rebels but which are rarely reported.

people of faith in the midst of a complex and evolving context, that has relevance both within and beyond the region. Part of that process will involve a restoration of Christian-Muslim dialogue to ensure understanding, plurality, diversity and tolerance once the traumas and tragedies of the present are put behind us. But whenever and however that happens, the journey of healing and rebuilding of trust, will be a long and painful one, and one that will require all our patience and wisdom to support and encourage.



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