

Progressive Voices



Dec 2019, PV31

Film Project

In his recent Chair's Update, Adrian commented that the film project was 'one of the most original and significant pieces of work which we have undertaken'. Whilst the pragmatist in me is cautious of raising expectations too much, especially given my involvement, it certainly does feel like a bold and creative initiative that could engage people in new and profound ways; and that is exciting!

It was decided very early on that the last thing we needed was more theologians regaling us with exciting new theories and practices; as enjoyable as many of us find that prospect, there are plenty of excellent books and conferences for us, and a niggling truth that very few others care.

What we will soon have is a series of six films about people who are largely unknown, like most of us, and most of the potential viewers. Their lives are not any more remarkable than many of ours and their achievements unlikely to feature in any history books. And yet they are wonderful people with stories that are disarmingly honest, journeys that will resonate deeply, and attitudes that will gently and gracefully provoke both emotional responses and fundamental questions.



The first film, which is complete, tells Gemma's story. Gemma, who grew up a Christian in Stockport, now owns a small farm in a Pennine village and is a practicing Hindu. Once happy with her faith, she reached a point where a 'glass screen shattered' and she chose to freefall. It was in

Gandhi's autobiography that she found healing and love and acceptance. She now recognises a God who is bigger and broader than we could ever imagine, found equally in church and temple, accessible through prayer and shrine alike. Gemma's husband, the local vicar, is deeply integral to a shared and creative spirituality that hints at the wonderful potential of religions common ground.

The next two films are nearing a final edit



and pick up the tales of Holly and Nat. The former a young woman who is passionately committed to Christian Climate Action. Often working alongside Extinction Rebellion and, inspired by Jesus and the history of social justice movements, they carry out

acts of non-violent direct action in order to provoke change. Nat, in his teens, contracted HIV the first time he had sex. Fearing the loss of relationship with his strong Christian mother, and struggling with his faith and sexuality,



he and carried this secret with him for the next fourteen years.



The final three films are due to be completed in the first quarter of next year and will follow the same pattern of relatable individuals telling stories that tackle human truths and contemporary issues.

The challenge for us in the meantime is to work out what to do with the set of films once we have them!

The films will ultimately be available to anyone and everyone, but I hope that you, as members and groups, will be a virtually guaranteed audience! We are working on producing some accompanying material that can be used in groups. The plan is to send some film previews out to a few groups in the new year, along with some draft material, and invite them to input in to and shape the process.

Launch events are beginning to be talked about, a website will be established, and we will utilise as many publicity channels as we can – including those suggested by the film producers and our own social media channels. What we haven't yet got is a name for the series; but maybe that will be the last thing that falls in to place.

Although this kind of planning is crucial it is worth recognising that, once the films are launched and posted online, they will have a life of their own. PCN will not try and 'own' them by restricting their availability or charging for them. Whilst this might be a slightly uncomfortable feeling, especially given the cost involved in making them, it feels important that the stories are granted the freedom to fly. Their value will be in the conversations they start, in the explorations they initiate, and even in the personal transformation they might inspire.

One other thing that we could all do to help is contribute to the film fund; there is a place to do this on the website. We are not far off being able to cover the cost of these six films and if some exceptional generosity leads to any excess – there are many other wonderful stories we could yet tell!

Ian Geere

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Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions, are all welcome.

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dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

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Welcome

By the time this issue reaches you we will be in the middle of Advent, and a General Election! So this year's time of preparation for celebrating that Jesus was born has an added level of excitement / dread / apathy. To help each other through in this issue we will reflect on Jesus' birth, truth, humility, death, Creation, inspiration, and lots or book reviews to tempt you, including the latest from Richard Dawkins. There is also a signpost to various organisations to help us to engage with Climate Change.

Welcome to the 31st edition of PV. Enjoy!

Membership

PCN Britain has charitable status, and depends wholly on its membership for funding the work we do. Membership of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain is for all who value an open, progressive and theologically radical voice within British Christianity, and want to maintain and promote that generous understanding of faith.

01594 516528

www.pcnbritain.org.uk/membership



www.equalitytrust.org.uk

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

Further information, including details of publications and conferences:

www.pcnbritain.org.uk



Progressive Christianity Network Britain

www.pcnbritain.org.uk

www.facebook.com/pcnuk/

Trustees

Adrian Alker, Chair
adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Martin Bassant
martin.bassant@pcnbritain.org.uk

Dave Coaker, editor of Progressive Voices
dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Simon Cross
simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk

Ian Geere
ian.geere@pcnbritain.org.uk

Sandra Griffiths, Honorary Secretary
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk

Sue Hobley
sue.hobley@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jenny Jacobs
jenny.jacobs@pcnbritain.org.uk

Paul Onslow, Vice Chair
paul.onslow@pcnbritain.org.uk

Tony Sanchez
tony.sanchez@pcnbritain.org.uk

Peter Stribblehill, Treasurer
peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

Mo Wills
mo.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

Staff

Sarah Guilfoyle, administrator and assistant web editor
sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk

Pete Eveleigh, Web host

Janis Knox, Social Media Editor
janis.knox@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jess Lee, DVD Librarian
jess.lee@pcnbritain.org.uk

Peter Bellenes, web editor
peter.bellenes@pcnbritain.org.uk



Trustee's Letter

In order to write this, I'm taking a short break from my work, which today consists of preparing a lecture for some students studying a module called 'Crime, media, and politics.' The students are a lively and engaged bunch, many of them older than the 'classic' university student, and generally looking at their degree course to provide them with skills they can use in the workplace. When I was with them last, we talked about the way that crime news is constructed, how journalists use certain techniques to engage their readers with a story.

In our discussion of story-telling we began to consider how crime news and other stories reflect a common template which is found in a host of different cultures and contexts: the so-called hero's quest. It's Frodo and his journey to Mordor, or Harry Potter and his epic battle against Voldemort. The same story is told in religions too, such as the story of Siddhartha Gautama, who was brought up in a life of privilege but one day encountered a suffering man. He became driven to solve the problem of suffering, eventually arriving at a point of enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree.

This idea is drilled into us from an early age, whether it's the knight versus the dragon, or the cheeky mouse versus the mean cat. It's the idea of the hero and the villain, and the journey of the hero to find the 'one thing' that will make the world a better place – to destroy the ring, to defeat the evil wizard, to find a way to transcend suffering, to slay the dragon, or to eat the cheese.

Politicians use this myth all the time. In their 1970 election manifesto the Conservatives promised to create "a better tomorrow", free from the "fear of crime". The idea of the "fear of crime" hadn't long entered the general vocabulary, and Heath's Tories were the first party to weaponise it politically. Now

they too had a holy grail, a mission on which they must go in order to change the world. What they didn't perhaps recognise was that just talking about the idea of 'fear of crime' made people all the more fearful. While trying to solve the problem, they were exacerbating it.

The same is true of so many of these heroic quests, except perhaps the most neatly wrapped up fictions. So often the setting up of a grand quest involves creating the very problem we seek to solve. This is particularly true of the language we use about people.

When we start using ideas of 'them and us' we subconsciously tell ourselves to check whether the person we are thinking of is one of them, or one of us: a 'goodie' or a 'baddie'. This has been very obvious in political rhetoric recently, who knew we were all so divided on Europe until we started telling each other we were? Surely the truth about our relationship with the EU is much more nuanced, than 'remain' versus 'leave' would make it appear. And if it's true of our politics, it's also true of our religion. We must take great care not to fall in to the trap of 'good versus bad' – not to take sides too readily and in so doing create a level of opposition that wasn't there before. We think of some people as saintly, because they seem to us to be so good. The truth is that those people seem so good because they are the people who see good in those around them. Saints are looking for goodness, not creating lines of division.

Simon Cross is a writer, researcher, and a PCN trustee.
simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk



Letters

Confusing words and labels

From time to time the press carries out surveys to discover how many people consider themselves to be 'religious' or 'Christian'. But they fail to explain what they mean by these terms. Traditional Christians believe in God, who receives and answers prayer, and in Jesus, whose teachings they do their best to follow. They usually insist in describing Christians as those who believe in the supernatural. Meanwhile many progressive Christians have ceased to believe in a supernatural being, while endorsing Christian values. They would also claim to be

Christian, as would many cultural Christians, who describe themselves as 'non-religious' but are proud of their Christian heritage and values. Christian values of 'love, compassion, justice and freedom' have been adopted by the diocese of Worcester in its 'Kingdom People' vision: www.cofe-worcester.org.uk/kingdompeople As a sceptical Anglican and PCNer, I find the eight characteristics of this vision to be positive and helpful, while ignoring its references to the supernatural. The first of these values: 'love' is another ambiguous word in English. It is commonly understood to mean personal or physical affection. However, the Greeks had two words for love: agape and eros. Agape

used to be translated in the Bible as charity. Today charity has a rather restricted meaning. We need another word or phrase to describe unconditional caring for the well-being of others. The golden rule, shared with other faiths, 'Do as you would be done by' only goes so far in providing an answer. But at least it is more understood than 'agapeic love'!

Mike Sumpner

Want to reply? Have your own burning question? A comment on a recent event? Want to check whether a thought is unique to you?

If so, please get in touch
dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Memoriam



John Simmonds

John died recently after a long illness, and there was a very large attendance at his funeral in Chesterfield, the town where he and his wife Chris grew up. Many had travelled long distances to be there, eager to give and hear tributes and to give personal thanks. The beginning and end were in Chesterfield, but there was much in between – to Birmingham's Handsworth College for initial training as a Methodist minister, up to Shetland for probation and early years then down to housing estate Birmingham and to Cannock. Then quite a period in Sheffield, which included university chaplaincy. All the while John's theology was evolving from simple bible-believing, through deep thought, reading and experience, which came to a head in his work at Methodist HQ on the in-service training of fellow-ministers, combined initially with serving a multi-cultural church in Hammersmith. In this period John was both respected and reviled, pressing on with ground-breaking projects, making many friends and some opponents, writing extensively, including an experience-based doctorate thesis, and culminating in sharing prominently in the famous 1993 Methodist Conference at Derby, which gave support to gay and lesbian people. 'All are welcome' says the hymn, but it sadly isn't wholly true, as he often pointed out. This was a crunch point. He had been unanimously elected by its synod to be 'Chair' of a British Methodist District, but the nomination was then contested by a conservative faction and withdrawn. (Only in this last year did the Methodist Church move further forward on the same-sex front). He and Chris licked their wounds and took what may have seemed an unlikely final appointment in the

Methodist/URC united congregation in Leek. He was much appreciated there, and very happy, which made for a good ending to his notable ministerial career.

For retirement, it was then back to the green hills of Derbyshire, founding and leading our Chesterfield-based PCN group. Others have evolved personally in the way that John did, and some have suffered for their developing convictions as he did. PCN and its kindred bodies are a refuge and a springboard for such people. The struggle goes on, now deprived of the grace, guts and gumption which were so manifest in John. At the thanksgiving service, in which both sons Ian and Mark took part, generous donations were given to ASSIST, the work among asylum seekers in Sheffield whose Conversation Club John and Chris had stoutly supported every week until ill-health curbed their efforts.

Paul King

PCN Annual General Meeting

Sat 21 March

11.00 am – 3.15 pm

Including the launch of our film project.

St Luke's Church, Holloway, London, N7 9JE

More details to follow.

Modern Church Conference 2020

Living in Love and Faith

What is liberal faith and what does it offer to the world?

13 - 17 July

£250 in ensuite / £196 in non

The speakers represent diverse sexualities, genders and theological outlooks, all of them pursuing a vision of sexual equality and gender justice in the light of faith. There will be eight presentations from well-known academics and campaigners, and each presenter will also provide a follow-up seminar.

High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Herts EN11 8SG

www.modernchurch.org.uk

PCN Science and Religion conference

Sat 25 April

Tom McLeish,
Professor of Natural Philosophy
York University

Friargate Quaker Meeting
House, Lower Friargate, York
YO1 9RL

11.00 am – 3.15 pm

More details to follow.

How Jews and Christians read the Bible

John Barton

'A History of the Bible: The Book and Its Faiths'

Thurs 27th Feb, 7.30pm

Trinity Church, Conduit Road,
Abingdon, OX14 1DB

£5 from Cliff Marshall,
01235 530480

cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk
or on the door.

Renewal and Rebellion Faith, Economy & Climate

Sat 7th March 2020, 10am-4pm

The Riverside Centre Derby
£10, free for unwaged

JPIT's national day conference invites you to join in looking at the big challenges we all face – rethinking economic structures and taking radical steps towards climate justice, and how we can all act to change them – in faith, for people and for planet.

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/whats-new/conference2020/

Church of England 2020 General Synod elections

A range of inclusive organisations across the CofE are campaigning to seek a diverse range of people on Synod. If you'd like to find out more please contact Nic Tall:
synod@inclusive-church.org

What can we believe about Jesus?

In the first of a four part series, Bob Reiss reflects on this subject exploring: Jesus' public ministry, the resurrection, the Christ of Faith, and beginning with the stories of his birth.

One of the more extraordinary things that happened to me in Westminster Abbey was to be asked at fairly short notice to join the then Receiver-General in taking the Foreign Secretary of China round the Abbey. The Foreign Secretary, who spoke excellent English, suddenly asked me when we were in the Shrine of St Edward what the evidence was for thinking that Jesus ever really existed. I realised any answer I gave had to be intellectually coherent, so I pointed out that two non-Christian historians, Josephus and Tacitus, had mentioned Jesus well within a hundred years of his death, and that the gospels were written during the lifetime of some who would have known Jesus when he was alive; the writers would not have made up a wholly fictional figure. Today no serious academic scholar would deny that Jesus existed, but I acknowledged that some of the details of the stories about him in the Gospels might not be historically accurate.

Contained within that is one of the major questions about Jesus - which Jesus do we believe in? New Testament scholars have often talked about a distinction between the Jesus who lived in Palestine and who died at Calvary, normally described as 'the Jesus of History', and Jesus as the Church later perceived and understood him, normally described as 'the Christ of Faith'. But disentangling those two concepts is difficult, because even within the New Testament itself the process of interpretation was underway, and it is now impossible to get back to 'the Jesus of history' without trying to deconstruct some of that earlier interpretation.

The debates about the nature of the Gospels make that a difficult exercise. They were probably written between thirty and sixty years after Jesus' death, they were not biographies in any sense that we would use the term now, the authors almost certainly did not personally know Jesus in his lifetime, and their books were written to provoke faith and discipleship rather than give accurate historical information. We have no idea what Jesus looked like, whether he was ever married or had children (although it seems unlikely) and even the stories of his birth are uncertain. Are they history or theological interpretation?

Only Matthew and Luke have anything about Jesus' birth, but because in many churches the whole celebration of Christmas has been taken over with children in mind, they are often not considered as adult stories. But in fact the purposes of Luke and Matthew were anything but child-like. Both are

profoundly theological stories, designed to bring out the significance of the child Jesus according to the wider purposes of the two authors.

The nativity according to Luke

Luke thought he had to explain Christianity to the Roman authorities, and decided that he had to show its origins. He was clearly well educated, with a good command of Greek. He could have been a Jew or a Gentile. If he was a Gentile, then he had a very good knowledge of Judaism. If he was a Jew then he was certainly well integrated into Gentile society. He wrote his gospel for someone whom he described as 'most excellent Theophilus'. It sounds as though Theophilus was a high-ranking Greek figure in the Roman Government. Luke wrote to explain the figure of Jesus, portraying him as someone of nobility, grace and charm. He suggests Jesus was able to reproduce those same qualities in the lives of his followers and enabled even the outcasts of society to rise to decency and dignity. He also wanted to show that this Jesus identified with the poor, the humble and the outcast. That theme runs throughout his gospel and is there in two of the most well known features of his nativity account. First, where was Jesus born? It is Luke who says that it was in a stable because there was no room in the inn. Could there be any greater way of identifying with the outcast than that? Secondly, Luke also says it was shepherds who first recognised the significance of this birth, people often looked down upon by the orthodox Jewish authorities because their occupation made it almost impossible to follow strict religious observance.

So central themes of Luke's Gospel were there right from the very beginning in his birth narratives, most notably expressed in the words of the Magnificat 'he has raised up the humble and meek.' This is no children's story, but a symbolic prefiguring of all that Jesus was to do later in his life.

The nativity according to Matthew

Matthew's story is told in 31 verses in all, while Luke's story takes 132 verses. So Luke's account is far more detailed, and in Matthew there is nothing about a stable or even an inn or any census. The implication of Matthew's gospel is that Bethlehem was the home of Mary and Joseph. There is nothing about a choir of angels, or shepherds. And Matthew's purpose was to show that Jesus was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.

That is true even of the most well known of Matthew's nativity stories, the coming of the wise men. Who were they, and whom did they seek? They were Gentiles, not Jews, yet they came to see 'The King of the Jews'. Their presence was a foretaste of the whole message of Matthew's

Gospel: what had previously been for the Jewish people alone was now for everyone. What Old Testament story would the visit by the magi have suggested to Matthew's original readers? The visit by the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, when she presented the king with gold and great quantities of spices... and then she and her servants went home to her own country. The parallel is even clearer if you read one of the rabbinic commentaries on that passage that would have been familiar to Matthew's readers. For there it is said that the Queen of Sheba was guided to Solomon by a star. Matthew's point is obvious. This Jesus is not only the new Moses and the new David, but the new Solomon as well, the builder of the Temple. And as Matthew says later in his Gospel, he is indeed greater even than Solomon.



This is what Matthew was doing in his nativity stories. He was not concerned to give an accurate historical account of what happened, as though he were a twenty-first century historian. Rather he wanted to show that this baby was no ordinary one; and by interpreting Jesus against the background of the Old Testament he proclaimed that Jesus would usher in a new world, where the promise to the Jews would be extended to Gentiles as well. Jesus for Matthew was a new Moses, a new David, a new Solomon, and this was first recognised by Gentiles. Jesus was the root from which all that was good in Judaism would be maintained in the world.

The birth of Jesus

What happened to Jesus straight after his birth? Matthew describes Jesus being taken immediately to Egypt by Mary and Joseph in order to escape the violence of Herod. Luke, who says nothing of the massacre of the innocents, has Jesus being presented in the Temple in Jerusalem, very shortly after his birth. They cannot both be right. This has led some biblical scholars to conclude that there is almost no historical element in these two accounts. The editor of the Oxford Companion of Christian Thought, Professor Adrian Hastings, wrote the article on Jesus himself and says 'It seems likely that Jesus was born in Nazareth'. Not all Biblical scholars would be as definite as that, some certainly argue that there is an element of history in the accounts of both Luke and Matthew, but what is certain is that among biblical scholars there is no consensus even on the place of Jesus' birth.

The scepticism of some would apply also to that most debated of questions: was this really a virgin birth, or, to be more accurate to the Gospels, a virginal conception? Some scholars say that the whole tradition of a virgin birth developed from Matthew's mistranslation, where the original text in

the Hebrew 'young woman' was translated into Greek as 'virgin'. It is argued that Matthew believed that Jesus was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, so if that was what the Old Testament said, he thought it must be true. If that was a mistranslation, which it certainly was, then that changes the matter. It is also notable that the genealogies in both Matthew and Luke trace Jesus through the line of Joseph.

Personally, I am not convinced that the historical veracity of the virgin birth matters very much. There is a genuine scholarly debate, and has been for very many years. Perhaps the most sensible thing is to consider that the gynaecological details of the birth of Jesus are not finally the point. What is undoubted, and incontrovertible, is that Jesus was born. When, where and how, is secondary to the fact of his birth. And, through his life and death, he did change the world. He fulfilled the purposes that Matthew wanted, because he made all that was good in Judaism available to a far wider Gentile world, and he fulfilled the purposes Luke points to, because he identified with the poor and the outcast and raised them up to a new level of dignity. As the Magnificat sung allegedly by Mary at the annunciation put it:

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the humble and meek.

Because of Jesus the world is a very different place. His birth did change everything – and that is what finally matters.



Bob Reiss was a Canon of Westminster until his retirement, and author of 'Sceptical Christianity'.

In Search of Truth

With the help from Luke's Narrative Parables

The telling of a story always invites a response from the reader or listener. It is a moment of interaction where issues may be highlighted, dilemmas explored, hopes valued, anxieties exposed and truths excavated. Our privilege as readers and listeners is to allow ourselves to be drawn into tales, whether fictional or non-fictional, with a degree of close attentiveness which enables the story to come alive. This is true whether in conversations with others or in reading ancient texts, such as Luke's Gospel.

In exploring this privilege in relation to Luke's parables it is worth asking, first of all, how we might approach these narratives as a whole. We will then move to a closer look at the story in Luke 16:1-8a – the parable of the Survivor Manager.



Here are four key aspects which may facilitate and guide our interpretation:

1. A helpful starting point is to ask ourselves what the extent of the parable is – where it begins and where it ends. This is sometimes more straightforward than others. The Survivor Manager in Luke 16 is notoriously difficult, with a range of suggestions as to where the story finishes, from verse 7 to verse 8a to verse 8b to verse 9. In contrast the parable of the Father and Two Sons (Luke 15:11b-32) is much clearer. The reason why it can be helpful to identify the actual contents of the story is because this enables the narrative to stand as a story in its own right, without having any interpretation from surrounding verses imposed upon it. It allows the story to be a story, and the reader to engage directly with the narrative plot, released from preconceived points that turn the parable into an illustration. The story in Luke 18:2-5 offers an exploration of a courageous widow determined to find justice. Yet if we read it in the light of Luke 18:1 it has been turned into an illustration of the need to pray.

2. Reading parables as stories releases us from understanding them as metaphors or allegories. The risk with allegorical interpretation, where characters are simply regarded as representing someone else (for example, the father, judge, landowner or king is often understood to be God), is

that meaning is closed down and finalised, cutting off any sense of exploration. It may well be that Jesus told these stories to encourage people to engage more insightfully with their own immediate context. To not use the narrative parables to talk in metaphor about God or religion, but to enable people to see themselves more clearly in relation to their own lives and their world. Hearing the story of the Father and Two Sons may have drawn them into a deeper appreciation of family dynamics, particularly when life malfunctions. Listening to the tale of the Pounds (Luke 19:12-27) may have drawn out sympathy for the courageous whistle-blower.

3. Parable investigation entails a journey into a foreign world. First-century Palestine was a very different place from twenty-first century northern Europe in terms of language, religion, climate and economics – and, perhaps most importantly, in relation to culture. Jesus' parables belong within a culture of honour and shame, where establishing and maintaining a certain public reputation was a significant goal. The story of the Great Dinner (Luke 14:16-23) describes an attempt by someone wanting to consolidate his position in society by inviting wealthy guests, who shame him with their flimsy excuses for not accepting. We have to be careful not to assume that Jesus' listeners and Luke's readers would have necessarily responded in the same way in which we might to the questions and issues raised across the parable collection.

4. Since the parables are skilful literary creations, they call for a predominantly literary approach. Historically there has often been a tendency to dwell on points of theological significance and meaning. Parable research over more recent decades, however, has encouraged us to focus on the quality of the story, paying particular attention to the plot and to the characters, asking critical questions about motive and identity, reading the text as closely as possible in order to ask questions of it and allowing it to ask questions of us.

With all this in mind we turn to the parable of the Survivor Manager (Luke 16:1-8a). Picking up



particularly on the idea of questions that are raised by examining the plot as closely as possible, my intention is to identify four gaps or spaces which leave us asking the question why and which then coax our imaginations into formulating suggestions and possibilities. These four areas are not exhaustive, nor are the suggestions, but they nevertheless provide an example of how we might engage creatively with the tale and formulate our own questions and responses.

Question 1 – Why are the charges brought and by whom?

It is interesting that the person bringing the charges is not identified. This could be a friend or ally of the rich man who has had his suspicions that his friend is being ripped off by his manager and so wants to protect him. It could be a tenant farmer who, in querying payments, has uncovered something and has decided to expose this in front of the rich man. It could even be a rival of the current manager who is deliberately seeking the removal of the manager in order to usurp his position.

Question 2 – Why does the rich man allow the manager time and space to come up with a plan, rather than sacking him on the spot?

It is possible that we are dealing here with an incompetent landowner who has little idea how to handle staff and how to ensure that profits are maximised and not squandered. He seems to struggle with running a tight ship. On the other hand he may not care too much about losses and dishonesty, since his wealth can more than cope with such things. Then there is also the chance that the rich man is more perceptive than it seems and that he is offering his manager a second chance, an opportunity to make up for what he has done, or even to show his employer the kind of ingenuity he might be capable of.

Question 3 – Why is there a discrepancy in the reductions?

The manager halves one bill, but reduces the other one by only a fifth. Perhaps he is seeking to demonstrate particular generosity towards one farmer in the hope that this one will, in the future, look out for him. Alternatively the manager may be deliberately trying to sow hostility, jealousy and division among the farmers, which could potentially lead to disruption for the landowner.

Question 4 – What happens in the end?

The rich man commends the manager for his shrewdness. He may even allow himself half a smile at how the manager has reacted. The latter has certainly not taken the anticipated dismissal lying down, but responded with energy to try and shape a future for himself. We are not told the final outcome. Neither is the manager praised for his dishonesty. It is the shrewdness which catches the eye of his employer. Such a proactive response may make the



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<https://www.needpix.com/photo/download/1200400/question-reality-truth-fact-actuality-belief-unknown-curiosity-true>

rich man think again and so lead to the manager's reinstatement. If not, the farmers may or may not provide a welcome. As the manager he is caught between the one above him and those below him, needing to keep everybody content and so finding himself squeezed into a position of vulnerability. There is no clear conclusion, and quite deliberately so, for the response lies with the listener or reader, who is being asked: what do you think should happen next?

Our reading of parables (as of any encounter or conversation) is enhanced by two characteristics in our approach - critique and compassion. In searching with questions we develop our ability to be critically attentive to what is going on in the world around us as well as in our relationships. We will see the world more perceptively and more truthfully as a result. In carefully appreciating the situations, problems and dilemmas of the characters we deepen our sense of compassion for them and for those with whom we share the world. We will see others with greater truth, wisdom and understanding. If we are courageous enough, we will learn to see ourselves more honestly, for the very questions we bring to a parable, and the particular ways in which we understand the characters, will reveal to us something of the truth that lies at the heart of who we are.



David Bidnell is a Methodist minister in Huddersfield.

The Strutting of the Unbeliever

In the fortieth Surah of the Qu'ran it is written 'None can dispute about the Signs of Allah but the Unbelievers. Let not, then, their strutting about through the land deceive thee.' (translation Abdullah Yusuf Ali). To strut is to walk - and pronounce your ideas and beliefs - in a pompous, rigid, and dogmatic way. Are we being coaxed into thinking 'we reason but they strut'? Terms like 'believer' and 'unbeliever' are convenient labels, but I wonder whether they have come into use as quick ways of dismissing and diminishing people whose beliefs seem different from and incompatible with our own?

A clear way to demonstrate that you do not 'strut' is to assert how reasonable and humble you are. You are open-minded, aware of the dangers of pride and self-absorption, hope for mercy and fear judgement. All reasonable and responsible, not enough to be sincere and humble, you might then suggest that 'only those who also reflect deeply' will be acknowledged as believers: everyone else, by definition, is an unbeliever. Only by being sincere and humble, and reflecting deeply, can and will you recognise and believe in God.

Language is expressive yet it is also deceptive, and often illogical. While it is plausible to suggest that belief in God predicates a lot of sincerity, humble self-knowledge and moral responsibility, it is stretching the point to suggest that unbelievers cannot be sincere and humble, living morally responsible lives, showing authentic self-knowledge and empathy, being open-minded to the beliefs (including faith beliefs) of others. Or that, as a result of being sincere and humble in their fashion - say as humanists or agnostics, Buddhists or pagans, ex-Christians or don't-knows - they necessarily reject the spiritual dimension of life, persisting in some kind of materialistic bubble of scientism.

The strutting of unbelievers can be a pose of fear and over-compensation. It is, so believers often contend, natural for us to believe in gods or a God, and so unnatural for us not to. It goes against nature itself, which, in its complex and ordered design, demonstrates the working of a creator God. The alternative, for unbelievers, is a life devoid of meaning and purpose, centred around our basic human instincts and desires, with no space or capacity for reasoning, moral improvement, and no openness to the possibility of the transcendental. How can we be sincere and humble if we put our desires, pride and ego first? Unbelievers cannot be really and truly accountable for their choices as they don't understand - and reject - the very reasonable idea that only in belief can you have a cogent understanding of purpose, truth and meaning.

Yet, as progressives within the Christian tradition and beyond, we need to reflect honestly on how

much of a false dichotomy this is. Not liking others' views lays the seeds of prejudice, hate speech, and censorship.

Christians, Muslims and many more apply reason in and to their faith: we can see that regularly when we discuss the problem of evil or the origins and purpose of the natural world. It is entirely possible to investigate the biology and chemistry of the cosmos and accept the premise that 'something must - or at least may - have come from something, and not from nothing'. Islam accommodates intelligent design. It is not incredible for us to consider the Beatitudes as a checklist in a secular world, and mindfulness would be nowhere without Buddhism.

At the same time, open-minded secular arguments, far from being crafted as atheistic rants, welcome discussion about moral choices, reason and belief, whether we have one life or not, and the extent to which we are accountable to each other in the common good. Red lines do occur - they are bound to do so: about accountability to a spiritual being, the existence of one, how trustworthy revelation is as evidence, and life beyond. Alister McGrath and A. C. Grayling help us understand such debates.

Many people today, young and old, resist traditional religion because they want conversation rather than conversion. Going into hospital changes most of us - believers to angry sceptics, articulate agnostics into humble ascetics: the moral matrix is always a place of movement and journeying. They also want reasonable and tolerant debate: atheism does not embrace meaninglessness, humanism is not morally narcissistic, and we need to revisit the traditional conceptions we have about crucifixion, resurrection, heaven and hell. Believers and unbelievers alike can strut, claim reason and truth for themselves, and set out to colonize and proselytize in dogmatic ways. Our thinking, like progressive thinking in every form of faith and belief, can and should accommodate challenging ideas without representing opposing views as incompatible and stupid. Straw-man arguments are legion - and a sign of intellectual opportunism.

It is human nature to strut at times: like all the choices we have, whether they come from God or just ourselves, we have the option - or not - to deceive others and to deceive ourselves. It can be dangerous, as Christian found when in *The Pilgrim's Progress* he visited Vanity Fair.



Stuart Hannabuss is a member of the Aberdeen PCN group, honorary chaplain at Aberdeen University, and an active musician.

Let us tread gently

For the past 3 years, since retiring from Anglican ministry, I have occasionally attended the Quaker meetings in Sheffield and have valued the times of silence and the Friends there. But somehow I didn't quite feel 'at home'. Then I was asked if I would take services at a parish church in Rotherham where there had been no priest for two years and the small congregation of about 30 people wished to maintain their Sunday service of Holy Communion. In taking services there I realised that I had a strong feeling of returning to my own tradition and upbringing and that sense of belonging. I cannot shake off the decades of receiving communion on a Sunday morning, and nor do I wish to.

I also occasionally lead worship at St Andrews URC in Sheffield, where the service of communion happens only once every few months. Opposite our home is a very lively Roman Catholic church where up to 400 people each Sunday receive Mass. The worship experiences of Christians vary considerably, as do views and attitudes towards rites and ceremonies. We live in a richly diverse religious world. In recent editions of PV, both Brian Wilson (a former PCN trustee) and Edward Hulme, have written about Communion and I value their contributions. They, and I suspect many others in our network, have many questions both theological and liturgical about the celebration of the eucharist and how it may or may not contribute to a progressive faith. Indeed, the trustees debated at length over the fourth of our 8 points.

In our Together in Hope booklets, 'Re-thinking Worship?' Jan Berry helpfully explored how we might find meaning in the sharing of bread and wine at the Table consistent with an open, questioning approach to faith, and I do commend the booklet for individual or group study. Speaking personally, I have always found the sharing of bread and wine, the gathering together around the altar, the inclusive invitation to all, young and old, believers and those who doubt, a powerful sign of a loving community placing ourselves in the heart of the Jesus story. If we think about the roots of Communion being in the Passover tradition, we are drawn into a meal of hospitality, solidarity, justice and hope.

I recognise that there are many aspects of this rite which are not conducive to progressive and inclusive thinking, and at St Marks in Broomhill we sought to confront these challenges. Our eucharistic prayers, for example from the Iona Community, moved away from unhealthy doctrines to do with blood sacrifice, substitutionary atonement and so forth. Children and adults did not have to go through hoops of learning and confirmation to receive the bread and wine. Communion was not like a passing out parade, with an examination passed.

As a parish priest I found it a privilege to know pastorally those who came forward and stood or knelt next to each other in that circle of acceptance. I vividly recall listening in my study to a man racked with guilt after spending time with a prostitute, and fearful of going to the GP about his anxiety over contracting HIV. The next Sunday he was kneeling at the rail next to one of the GP's, both unknown to each other. A powerful and humbling experience to give each of them that wafer and say to them, 'The Body of Christ, Broken for You.'

We live in binary times. The 'Brexit years' may well go down in history as the most divisive period in modern British politics. Division, discord and denunciation have also been common characteristics of religion. Through religious wars, through the Reformation, to the assault of the 'new' atheists, a paradigm of hard disagreement and dissent has weaved its way into the collage of faith. There are clear differences in the experiences and views of PCN members, be it theological (realism/non-realism)- be it about church (damaging/heart-warming) or whether PCN is too cerebral, too much head and not enough heart. For some, perhaps for many, church services like holy communion will evoke negative feelings. For others, like myself, sharing at the Table is a powerful sign of belonging and fellowship. My personal view, is that PCN must not add to the binary mood of the country but rather that we recognise that we are all on a journey, and that for so many people their religious life is bound up with tradition, upbringing, habit and loyalty to a community. I dare say there are many Roman Catholics who, if pushed, don't believe in transubstantiation and many Anglicans who think that the communion table should be open to all.

Perhaps the gift which PCN members can bring, be it in our churches or groups or gatherings, is to explore with honesty and kindness those areas of our religious practice in which we differ, whilst affirming those with whom we might disagree. Despite what dear Bishop Jack Spong wished for, head and heart do not always go together and perhaps we should not always try to make them. Twixt reason and experience there are many nuances which affect our behaviour and our practices. I guess none of us are 'progressive' in all areas of life and if sharing in holy communion at the most traditionalist Tridentine Mass fulfils a need in that person, let us tread gently.

Adrian Alker serves as the
Chair of PCN Britain
adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk



Forgotten Wisdom

How did we forget about dying? Everybody does it: dying, that is. Nobody talks about it. And it turns out that the silence isn't helping.

After thirty years in palliative care, I was increasingly despondent at the failure of all initiatives directed at getting all of us to talk about dying. Every time I met a new patient and their family, whether in their home, at a hospice or in the big hospital that was my main stamping-ground, I met the same set of fears. Dying: we can't talk about it, we'll only upset each other. We all know it's going to be terrible. Best just to avoid it.

When I met Karl, he was unconscious and his heart was failing fast. He was in the emergency room with his wife and sons. His sons were distraught: Karl had to be saved. The doctors must do something! They couldn't bear the idea of their Dad dying.

Their Dad was 96. They were, themselves, in their seventies. And every time Karl had tried to talk to one of his sons about the inevitability of his death, they had turned it into a joke, changed the subject, told him 'not to be so negative.' And now, here we were. He was dying, and his sons had no idea what type of care he would want. Luckily, Karl's wife had listened; they had discussed their preferences for their care at the end of their lives and the funeral arrangements they would like afterwards.

After Karl died, I felt a renewed desperation that somebody should do something about the public understanding of dying. Somebody who had seen a lot of deaths; someone who knew the pattern of events like a midwife knows the pattern of giving birth. Someone who had worked alongside people dying at home and in hospices, in care homes and in hospitals. Someone who... oh. Oh, dear. Me?

The walk out onto deep waters turns out to be a single step. After that, it's simply a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. The decision to try to do something about the public understanding of dying was met with an unexpected invitation to speak on Radio 4. The decision to keep trying was nourished by a listener who was a literary agent. Then a book offer. Then publication, reviews, a prize shortlist, invitations to speak. One step at a time, I am living an unexpected new life, aware always of the honour and the grace of being invited into people's minds and hearts as they read or listen to my work.

The message is pretty simple. It's the story of how we die. As medicine gets more and more sophisticated, fewer of us die suddenly and unexpectedly. Many of us live to great age, old enough to develop illnesses and conditions that



were less common when life was shorter. Dementia is probably the best example of this. Many of us will collect a variety of health problems as we live longer. There will be challenges, perhaps to our mobility, memory, our breathing or our bowels.

Yet, whatever the ailments that cause our eventual death, the pattern of dying is very similar. We become more tired. Our energy levels drop. We need to rest between activities. We sleep more. Sometimes we sleep a lot more. That sleep is restorative and important; it's like a battery-charger. But our battery is failing, and the charge doesn't last. We need another sleep; a longer sleep; several sleeps in a day.

Guessing life-expectancy is an inexact art. Patients often ask 'How long have I got?' as though we can calculate it to the nearest day, week or month. Science shows doctors are very bad at estimating life-expectancy, and usually we are over-optimistic. In fact, our patients often know better than we do. The best way to 'guestimate' life expectancy is by looking at energy levels: in my fifties, my running sessions take longer and I feel more tired than a decade ago. That change, over decades, suggests that my life-expectancy is measurable in decades. My aunt who has heart disease, and whose energy levels are clearly very much lower this year than two years ago, is probably counting down in years. My patient with lung disease, that he has tolerated for more than twenty years, now finds his energy levels are worse this week than during the summer when his grandchildren came to stay. This decline over a few months suggests his life expectancy is now measurable in months; possibly enough months to make a year or so, possibly not.

Towards the very end of life, people's energy levels are diminishing week by week, and later day by day. By this stage, they may be sleeping much of every day. It is the rate of change that helps us to predict

(‘guess’ might be a better word) their remaining life expectancy. When to call the family; when to advise the family to remain at the bedside.

What then? Well, as long as the symptoms of their life-ending illness(es) are well-managed, then the very end of life is fairly similar from one person to another. In the same way that every birth seems utterly unique and personal to the Mum, but the midwife recognises all the stages, so it is with dying. Whilst dying is as individual and unique an experience as each dying person is unique, we who look after dying people recognise all the same stages. We find that helping people to know what to expect helps them to be less afraid.

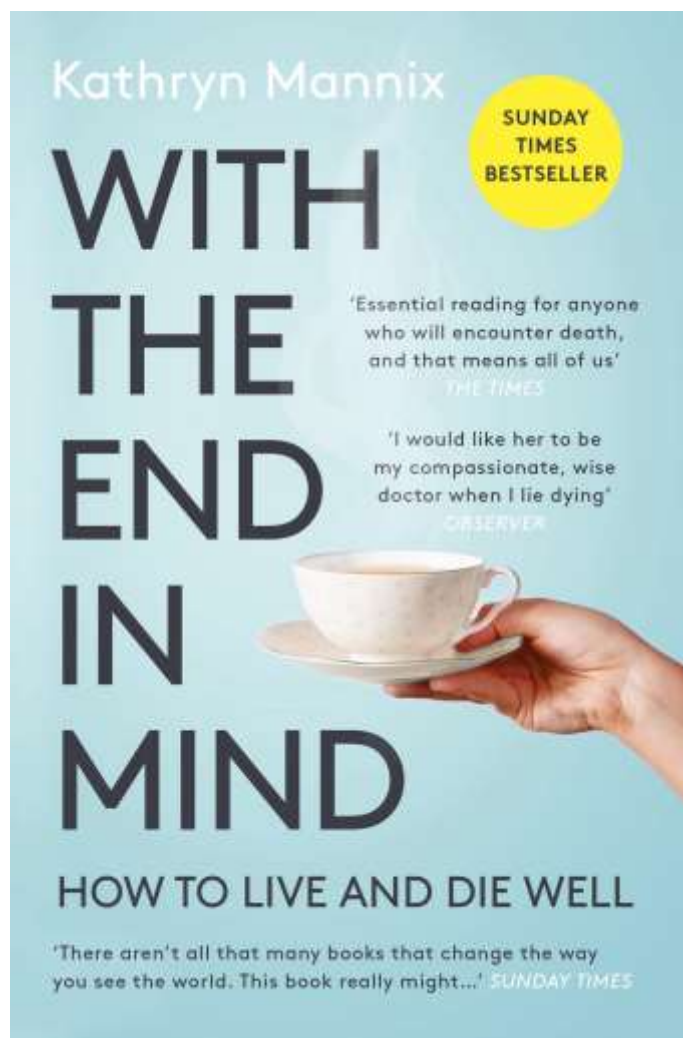
Towards the end of life, as energy levels dip ever lower, the person begins to sleep most of the time. Sometimes, without them noticing, they dip into complete unconsciousness – that is, they are in a coma for a while, before awakening again. We only know this if we can’t wake them up for an important visitor or at medicine time. They haven’t noticed it.

Increasing sleepiness means it’s time to swap any medications that keep symptoms at bay to a different route: we don’t want people to miss doses if we can’t waken them to swallow the medications that keep them free from pain, nausea, breathlessness, etc. We don’t want them to be disturbed by symptoms. Usually, the drugs are swapped into a syringe driver that slowly pumps the daily dose through a very tiny needle under their skin; the right dose to keep the symptoms away.

Eventually, the dying person is simply unconscious all of the time. The only part of the brain still working is the part that drives the breathing, keeping an automatic cycle of breathing going for a while. The cycle moves between deep and shallow, and between fast and slow. Because the person is unconscious, they don’t have awareness of their throat. This may mean their vocal cords are not fully relaxed, so the out-breath may vibrate the voice-box, and it can sound like a moan or a sigh. It’s important that the companions around the bed understand that this is normal, caused by unconsciousness, and isn’t a sign of distress or trying to speak.

Similarly, because saliva or mouth-care fluid might fall to the back of the throat but not trigger the coughing, spluttering, throat-clearing reflexes a conscious (even while asleep) person would have, their breath moves in and out of their wind-pipe through a thin film of fluid, bubbling as it passes. Families sometimes mistake this noise for drowning; it is the noise known as ‘death rattle’ and although it is odd and disconcerting to listen to, it is a comforting indication that the dying person is deeply unconscious: incapable of feeling distress.

As the breathing moves between phases of this cycle, there are pauses. The pauses can become very long, sometimes followed by a shuddering in-



breath. Again, this isn’t distress, it is another sign of unconsciousness.

At the very end of life, during a period of slow breathing, there will be an out-breath that simply isn’t followed by another in-breath. It can be so gentle that families around the bed don’t notice that it has happened. Sometimes, and far more often than we can explain, the last breath is while the companions are asleep or have briefly left the room. We don’t understand why this happens so often, but we recognise it is very common.

So all those Hollywood deaths; all those moments of deathbed drama on TV; all those terrifying scenes in our heads: they are wrong. Dying is a recognisable process, with clear stages and a natural progression. It’s sad, because we love the person who is dying. But we need not fear the process. We can console each other with facts instead of being afraid of dramatic fantasies. Our loved ones may be left grieving, but if they are helped to understand the process, then they should not be left afraid.



Kathryn Mannix recently retired from a 30-year career, as a doctor in palliative care, to campaign for better public understanding of dying.

On Becoming

The Bible, in the first chapters of Genesis, weaves together two accounts of creation. The first is focused upon the physical creation of the Earth, and the second upon humankind and living things. The story relating to physical creation depicts instant creative acts, as in: 'Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.' Genesis 1:3 (NRSV) In the second story, the "Lord God" by way of fiat, creates Adam and Eve and all living things.

Today's knowledge regarding the evolution of the universe and of living things makes the Genesis account of immediate creation untenable. However, in the attribution of the creative process to God, the Genesis creation story asserts its religious credibility. I believe that God is Creator, and that evolution is a principle which applies throughout the created order. That there is a freedom, and applied design, which ensures evolution: that is the uninhibited process of change. The Creator has set in motion what I see as the principle of Becoming, that allows for and encourages growth. Which, once established, leads to unbridled possibilities.

The principle of Becoming, also applies to the relationship of God to humankind. That relationship is not fettered, rather it is dynamic. The absolute responsibility of the individual, with respect to life decisions, rests with the individual. A relationship of the individual to God enhances the possibilities for growth; that is, completeness resides in such a relationship. The absence of responsibility denies the opportunity for growth. The acceptance of responsibility aligns the God/person relationship.

Professor Brian Cox, in a series of tv programmes, outlined the characteristics of the planets of the solar system. He emphasised that the universe is not a piece of clockwork, but rather it is dynamic and evolving. He instanced, that the planet Mercury has features which indicate that it had previously orbited further from the sun. In essence, Mercury has changed orbits, and may well, in the future, exit to some other place in the universe. Mercury is an example of the dynamism of the universe, and illustrates the process of evolving or Becoming.

With respect to the origins of life, Cox spoke of Saturn, and in particular one of its moons, Enceladus, being a possible site for the progress of geochemistry to biochemistry. Hydro vents emitting from seas below a frozen surface, could have contained the geo chemical substances which resulted in the creation of biological substances.

Venting under deep seas, both on Earth and Mars, also points to the possibility of geo/bio interactions.

Again this likely process for the creation of life, I believe, does not preclude the religious affirmation of God as Creator, with the principle running through all Creation; that of Becoming.

An evolving universe, physical and biological, leads to the exciting conclusion that created order is, and is meant to be, progressive.

If the process of dynamic creation applies to the universe, does the same principle apply to the relationship of God to humankind? Has God established a pattern of relationship which is static, that of master puppeteer, or is it based upon the freedom of the individuals to shoulder responsibility for their own personal decisions?

The gift of life entails the living such a life in often unpredictable circumstances. Just as the planets are subject to variable circumstances, so are human beings. God does not protect from, or grant exceptions to, the vicissitudes of life. Each person is free to make decisions and carry the responsibility for them. The relationship of the individual to God is, therefore, dynamic. The experience of the Creator in each life, depends upon the acknowledgement of the individual of that presence.

So it is with the created order. The universe evolved and is evolving. Life evolved and continues to evolve. There is no fixed order for the universe, nor is there for human beings. There is the exciting prospect which evolving presents. God has allowed for the freedom that accompanies change and growth, and stitched it into the fabric of the universe. There can be no exceptions to this rule; no interventions by God and no favoured treatment by God. A quote from Cicero (De Divinatione):

"For nothing can happen without cause; nothing happens that cannot happen, and when what was capable of happening has happened, it may not be interpreted as a miracle. We therefore draw this conclusion: what was incapable of happening never happened, and what was capable of happening is not a miracle".

For Christians, such a conclusion should be liberating. Jesus taught that the very nature of God is love. Love involves personal growth and responsible decision making. A relationship of the individual with God rests upon the individual's acknowledgement of the presence of God in creation, and spirituality, in life. This is encapsulated in the blessing: "when we live in love, we live in God and God lives in us".

It is surely a joy for a Christian to say that God's plan for Creation is to plan for all Creation, physical and biological, to be free to Become.



Bill Perry is a retired minister of the Uniting Church of Australia

Inspired by God?

... and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness... 2 Timothy 3:15-16 (NRSV)

The Jehovah's Witness at my door would quote this passage at me to argue that everything in the Bible, and their interpretation of it, was to be believed. I was never convinced. How could that statement be referring to a collection of documents which includes some which had not yet been written?

And now I find that proselytising atheists will also allude to this passage affirming that the Bible itself claims to be inspired by God. The only difference is that the atheists point out the absurdity of this as any sort of proof of inspiration. And now I wonder whether there is some other point to be made.

I then take a look at what else my atheist friends have to say. For instance, two penguins walk from Antarctica to the Middle East to get on a boat, and then they go back home when the rain has stopped. And God wrote it so it must be true? You really do have to grow up and toss all that stuff into the bin. Now I have to admit that even when presented in this very caricatured way the debunker's argument looks persuasive. It's a powerful conversation stopper with a strong element of the withering *ad hominem* - come on, now, you're not telling me grown-ups actually believe this?

It is expected at this point that the believer will admit defeat or the two will just go their separate ways. I want to tease out the hidden elements of the argument as I think there may be more to it and we may discover something interesting and worthwhile if we examine it more closely.

As I see it, the debunker's argument goes like this: If the Bible is the Word of God, then its narratives have to be historically true, its laws have to be morally good, and its prophecies will clearly have been fulfilled or will be on their way to being fulfilled. But the narratives can be shown in many cases to be historically inaccurate, untrue or even downright fanciful. Many of its laws are clearly immoral and unjust, and its prophecies are at least questionable. Therefore, it is not the Word of God and, further, it is to be rejected and the pursuit of religion abandoned. Suppose we ask, "Why would inspiration by God guarantee historical truth?" Setting the question this way makes it pretty well certain that the conservative believer and the debunker alike will agree upon the answer: God is not God if he does not guarantee truth. So let's approach from a different angle and ask, "Why would inspiration by God result in the kind of literature which the believer

and the debunker alike would write if they were God?" Or, "Why should I engage with this literature only if it is of one particular sort and not if it is of a different kind?" After all, many thousands of people read and appreciate literature which we know to be fictional. The point, however, is not that believers engage with the Bible because it is a genre of literature but because it is Scripture regardless of the genre of its constituent documents.

Reflecting upon the possibility that the Bible may be inspired by God does not in itself tell us how to interpret it. It does not tell us whether the passage is myth, legend, historical narrative or something else. It does not tell us whether we are reading about what actually happened or what people genuinely believed had occurred. This much we can expect the belief-debunker to agree with - but the conclusion all too readily pounced upon is that this collection of ancient stories is of no historical value.

A little reflection ought to show that, far from being of no historical value, they are immensely important. We ask, not, "What are the thoughts, deeds and plans of God?" but rather, "What did those ancient people believe and what stories did they tell?" With the Bible we are able to give fairly full answers to these questions but we can go further. What else did they believe? What other stories did they tell? We have access to more literature from the period in the apocryphal New Testament, the epistles of Ignatius, Clement, the Didache and the like.

This brings me back to 2 Timothy and now I observe that the writer uses two different though related expressions when referring to what has been committed to writing: *Hiera grammata* (v15) is Scripture which has made Timothy wise for salvation, but *pasa graphe* (v16) - all writing - is inspired by God and of use for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training. Can the writer really be saying something like this: "You have the Bible which has brought you to faith, but there is lots of other writing as well which is inspired by God."?

I confess that I would like to take this a step further, even in this age of instant publication, and say that all writing comes about by the exercise of a God-given talent and that we ought therefore to accord due respect to everything which people have taken the trouble to write. Let's read as widely as possible - we never know where it might take us.

Robert Crompton is a writer and retired Methodist minister living in Herefordshire.

<https://robrompton.org/>



Local groups

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

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

Our recent meetings have focused on the theme of bridging the Religion and Atheism divide. We enjoyed listening to recordings of the talks given at the London PCN conference by Julian Baggini and Richard Holloway. We are very grateful to Chris Avis for his work in making them available. We are now turning our attention to our role as a group within PCN Britain and our meeting with Adrian Alker in Nov. Our main focus for the coming quarter is the public lecture meeting we are organising at 7.30pm 27 Feb when our speaker will be John Barton, author of 'A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths'. Members of other groups will be most welcome. Our normal group meetings will be at 2.30pm on 3 Dec and 7 Jan at St Michael's Church Room, Abingdon OX14 1DU. Then at 7.30pm on 3 Mar in St Peter's Church Room, Church Lane, Drayton OX14 4JS. All details will be on our PCN Britain webpage. Typically between 14 and 20 people attend our meetings.

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

Our next group meeting will be held on 4 Dec. We will be listening to and discussing Richard Holloway's talk at the "Religion and Atheism – Beyond the Divide?" conference last June. Our meetings are normally on the first Wed of each month at 1.30pm until 3pm. They are held at 121 Junction Road, Bolton, BL3 4NF.

Edinburgh Mary McMahon
0131 441 3337 mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are trying to challenge ourselves about what we mean by our claim to be 'progressive Christians'. In Sept we began the exploration with two members, John McKechnie and Mary McMahon, each speaking about their respective journey to the present and how their understanding had evolved en route. The discussion suggested a broad spectrum within the group from orthodox to post-modern, with 'progressive' in there somewhere!

In Oct Clyne Shepherd continued with a talk about the formation of Karen Armstrong's theology, and asked us to think whether belief or experience or 'absence as presence' was more reflective of our position. In Nov John Hampton will explore 'a new mythology' with us - a fresh perspective, responding to the challenges of today. In Dec we look forward to welcoming Judith McClure, a retired public school head in Edinburgh and an ex-nun, whose topic is 'Once a nun...'

Oakham Peter Stribblehill
07918 916466 peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

On 29 Oct, two days before our EU departure date 'do or die', our topic was 'Apocalypse Now?' (perhaps Apocalypse Postponed). One of our members gave a brief introduction and then the 18 present split into 3 groups to look at Climate Change, Democracy and Populism and Social Justice. We were asked to explore these themes and come up with a pearl of wisdom and a question when we re-joined the main group for half an hour.

After much enjoyable discussion, reaching no particular conclusion, the climate change group came up with 2 pearls; firstly that it wouldn't matter to the planet if humans die out and it may be much better off without us, secondly that we should immediately appoint the wonderful Greta as world dictator on the grounds that she would soon sort us all out. Our question was: we know what is needed to save the planet – no cars, no central heating etc. But how do we manage ourselves locally, nationally and internationally to bring this about? (see pearl 2 above for the answer).

The democracy and populism group's pearl was to question everything, with fake news, populism etc. Its question: what should we do in the election when sovereignty is returned to the people?

The social justice group came up with a set of pearls: 1. Any God I believe in would expect me to go and do something for people rather than worship in church. 2. We are on the cusp of collapse / breakdown. 3. We are all shaped by our childhood – our roots and the love we may or may not have received.

After this meeting which was well

received, we will meet fortnightly until Tue 10 Dec. Our 2020 programme will again be fortnightly meetings at 2.30 in Oakham Methodist Church with a programme which will be shown on our website.

Newbury Maria Grace
01635 47196 maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk

Taking our timetable cue from the academic year (although we don't aim to be particularly academic), we set out on a new programme from Sept. We are on our second pass round the 8 Points, taking them in turn, with brief illumination, as a way to start our meetings. The churn in membership (happily more joining than leaving) provides the opportunity for new insights.

A very varied programme awaits us: we have started by trying to imagine how the dynamics of the early church could inform and influence us today – a particular challenge being to try to put ourselves into the political, social and religious background of the 1st century. By contrast, we then each contributed a poem, hymn or object with a personal meaning; what started as very wide choices, reflecting our eclectic nature, were found to have surprising common themes. Ahead lies: "Christmas – are we really looking forward to it?"; Christian interactions with Buddhism and revisiting the age-old question of the interface of politics and faith. The Friends Meeting House, in which we gather monthly, now sits right beside a major 3-year building site. Distracting noises may intervene, but there is no chance of us forgetting that we are about "compassionate love in action" in our part of this world."

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

We have found a new address. We have all been very grateful to the staff, churchwardens and the congregation at our old, longstanding venue. It is still an undoubted pleasure to be able to stretch out around our increasingly crowded table. We can now be found in the Brunswick Methodist Church, a handsome Georgian brick-built chapel tucked in among shops and public squares in the heart of Newcastle. Certainly the change of venue has lent itself to some appreciative comments from members: it's a comfortable large room, it's next to a kitchen and

there's a wonderfully helpful caretaker on hand. Best of all (remember this is Newcastle, and we're coming up to winter), it's also nice and warm!

During our first meeting in this new space, the group considered helpful metaphors and images from non-Biblical sources that illuminate other mental structures for Christian living. Focusing on varying passages drawn from Gerard Hughes, Richard Holloway and Evelyn Underhill, Liz drew attention to ways in which such ideas could offer a move away from laying down thoughts/concerns/petitions/thanks 'at the foot of the cross' towards a gradual accumulation of other mental images. Chief among them is quite possibly (well, for me anyway) Underhill's description of the 'scrawny alley cat' as being imbued with divine cosmic significance: I will never see a scrawny cat again without counting the atoms that we share in this universe.

North Staffs Nigel Jones
01782 632895 nigel.jones@pcnbritain.org.uk

We continue to meet on the first Sunday of each month and while some people have ceased attending a couple of new people now attend. We had another meeting looking at poems, including R S Thomas' brighter ones, i.e. The Bright Field and The Kingdom. We had two meetings discussing Desmond Tutu's approach. From his book 'God has a Dream' we looked at the freedom God gives us and Equality yet more than Equality, as Desmond puts it. In his book 'God is not a Christian' we examined some of his arguments for this conclusion, in particular that our God must not be too small, so that people like Gandhi can be included in those who walk closely with God. I like Desmond for the way he challenges many traditional understandings of the Christian way, yet remains so cheerful and positive about belief in God and Christ.

We had a talk by one of our attendees on Kierkegaard, yet he came to the conclusion that though sincere, he was self-centred rather than God-centred and I do not think we all agreed on that.

Another of our attendees who is a retired vicar, spoke at two of our meetings about the relationship between the Church and the Secular world. He maintains that the church has always been subject to powerful

political motivations that have blunted its mission of good news for the poor, taking the Magnificat as a key text. He claims also that everyone worships a god and the secular one is self-glorification, leading to misuse of power and evil inhuman acts. However, the church is often self-righteous and still unwilling to recognise its shortcomings, e.g. in relation to women and a wrong insistence on a particular atonement theory. Secularism may be a reaction against the church's own profanity and some atheists may have a higher implicit theism than those who go to church.

N Worcester David Tubb
01562 884344 david.tubb@pcnbritain.org.uk

At our last session in Sept, Richard Tetlow (a past member of our group and still an occasional visitor) joined us in a discussion of his book "Perceptions of Christianity from people of different faiths". Before tackling this, Richard wanted us to address our perceptions, as Christians, of other faiths, and to acknowledge the extent to which we ourselves were open to challenge and change. What for each of us, for instance, was the most important feature of our own faith in the context of inter-faith dialogue, and why was this the case. We did wonder in passing how far those of other faiths were themselves prepared to be open to critical examination in what for all of us of any religion is a very sensitive area of our lives. We have though our own responsibilities, others have theirs. We might well encourage one another.

I think most of us accepted as pretty fair on the whole the sometimes trenchant critique, by the contributors to the book, of Christianity (as practised), particularly experience of attitudes of arrogance and assumed superiority that mix old colonial culture with theology. Perhaps this makes us progressive! But it does also open up the whole matter of honestly accepting others' perceptions on truth, without losing sight of what is the real essence of our own faith. After all, some Christians' "baggage" is other Christians' treasured truths. It brought to my mind at least the comment by one of the contributors to the "Painting the Stars" which we have previously looked at: "Christianity is now too small a club for me!" Is this really what it comes

down to? Does the strong presence, at least in our major cities, of people of different faiths offer new light for Christians, socially and theologically? This was a valuable session for us, and we were duly grateful to Richard.

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

Our meeting on 23 Sept was led by David Bidnell, the Superintendent Minister of the Huddersfield Methodist Circuit. He spoke and led a discussion entitled "In Search of Truth - With the Help of Narrative Parables from Luke". (p.8-9) As I write we are looking forward to our 18 Nov meeting when we will be discussing Richard Holloway's lecture at "Religion and Atheism - Beyond the Divide". Philip Carlin will also speak about Holloway's book, "A Little History of Religion". The first meeting of the New Year will be on 20 Jan and the topic will be confirmed at the Nov meeting. There will also be opportunity to discuss the suggestion that we should meet more frequently.

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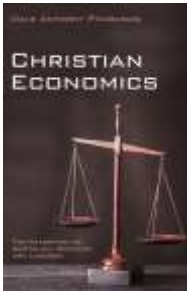
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Reviews

Christian Economics by Dale Anthony Pivarunas, Resource Publications

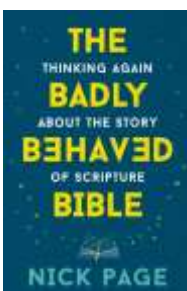


If you are looking for a basic economics text book set within the context of the USA, or an analysis of social democracy then this may be of interest. If you are made angry by the disconnect between

contemporary Christianity and the practice of Matt. 25, “as you did it to the least of these”, then there is much righteous anger to encourage you to go on applying the principles of the radical Jesus. However, this is a furious response to the politics and economics of “Make America Great Again”. There is too much emotive language [e.g. “the rape of the working class”] and far too many repeated statistics. The premise is disconnect, but that is also the way it is written. It is full of repetition, rather than the development of a coherent argument. He poses too many questions answered in all-too-obvious ways. It does not translate well across the Atlantic. If only he had been more disciplined and broadened his argument to a universal democratic socialist analysis of Matt. 25 in practice. But his intent was obviously a critical analysis of American Christianity being disconnected from the radical teaching and life-style of Jesus. Having been very critical, I can recommend this book to readers who are wondering how the dystopian politics and economics of the Johnson / Trump partnership will work out. If you can get beyond the many shortcomings, then it is full of pointers to help build the progressive resistance against political populism and economic exploitation.

John Churcher

The Badly-Behaved Bible by Nick Page, Hodder and Stoughton



Page tackles the Bible and church history with a matter-of-fact humour in a style that is both readable and challenging. This is for those whose questions about the

Bible are jarring against what they believe the Bible is supposed to be. The Bible is for many Christians the unquestionable ‘word of God’. But quite a lot of it is hard to square with this. There are violent and disturbing passages recounting genocide, abuse of women, massacre of children, alongside explicit passages that you are unlikely to hear read out on a Sunday. There are also bits that are boring or difficult to understand. Nick takes an affectionate sideways glance at these, looking at how story and culture are key aspects of the Bible. His approach is about studying the text, understanding the culture, questioning the content but more importantly, “it’s about using our imagination and creativity, it’s not just about reading the text, it’s about listening to it as well”. In chapter ten he gives a perfect example of how the Bible speaks differently to people at different times, showing how a passage from Zephaniah can have varied cultural, historical, doctrinal and very personal understandings. Progressive readers may well find themselves on a similar wavelength to this, so it will make perfect sense much of the time. On the other hand, this is an enjoyable and thought-provoking read that is worth sharing with more conservative Christians and as such might well make a great read for a study group or just a conversation with friends.

Andy Long

How to Pray by Pete Greig, Hodder



I really wanted to like this, as I value the 24/7 Prayer movement and it is by the founder. The insights of the desert fathers and mothers are here, with Teresa of Avila, and evangelical

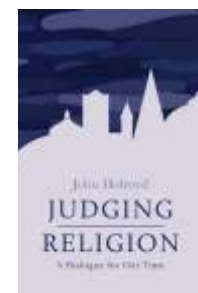
favourites such as Corrie ten Boom. Centring Prayer is covered and Contemplative Prayer, though as a “dangerous gateway to New Age Deception.” He is sensitive on the topic of unanswered prayer and the only problematic section was about “spiritual warfare”. But there were two aspects that I really didn’t like. The first is that it is a manual. Such a “how to” approach for me misses the essence of prayer in that I find it far from simple and a lifelong journey. The second aspect that irritated me is the over-use of quotations, anecdotes and stories. There’s over-

sharing, in particular the illness of his wife and its consequences. The book is intriguing in the fleeting references made to the prayer practice of other faiths. There is a brief positive treatment of the Muslim view of submission to God. Greig confesses here: “We have God all wrapped up in Bible verses ... There is no mystery, only certainty in our religion.” That’s how the book reads too! I was quite disturbed, however, at one aspect of his opening discussion on the prevalence of prayer in human experience where he mentions Hasidic Jews.

Nick Jones

Judging Religion by John Holroyd, SilverWood Books

Religion is in the dock and Holroyd



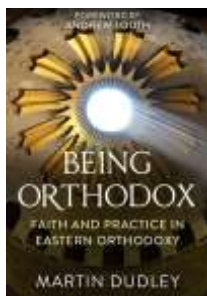
pleads for the defence against: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris. He attacks their expertise: “Huge judgments and generalisations

have been made about religion by people who have not spent their lives studying it, who are not religious scholars and who have not had an experience of being religious in anything but a nominal sense.” After defining “religion” and explaining “ethical judgements”, whether relative or absolute, and their status, we hear the evidence. The prosecution focusses solely on the ancient creeds, bizarre rituals and the many moral failings that occur in all faiths. Ignored are “the rich cultural and emotional life that individuals and communities share, the stratospherically glorious aesthetic and spiritual expressions that testify to remarkable religious motivation and enervation”. Holroyd reveals the negative and biased media reporting of religion and then presents the ethical nature of religion in four contexts: Germany 1933-45; US civil rights 1960-70s; liberation theology in South America; and the conflict between Palestine and Israel. The charges of militancy and misogyny against Islam are cross-examined. The rise in militancy correlates with Western colonial and geo-political interference. Little heed is paid to the fact that “most effective counters to Islamist militancy today come from within Islam”. The inconsistency between an all-

powerful and all-merciful loving God and the existence of evil and suffering - prosecution evidence against - are discussed at length. He concludes that: in contemporary British society religion and its moral implications need to be constantly re-assessed. It is suggested that the nature of this dialogue is such that: "Accepting disagreement and working alongside it rather than always seeking its eradication is seen here as both a moral and a practical way forward in negotiating contrasting values between religions, between believers and non-believers and within multi-cultures." The bibliography is extensive, his wide-ranging contribution and clear thinking gives us a better understanding of the issues.

Robin Story

Being Orthodox by Martin Dudley, SPCK



Dudley provides a wealth of information as he explores living and practicing an Orthodox life, its mysteries and complexities, focusing on worship. It is in

three sections: The first focuses on God and the Trinity; the Bible and Orthodoxy; and worship. The next explores life from birth to death; fasting, confession and communion; Orthodoxy in literature, art and music. The last discusses tradition and theology. There are detailed appendices but the bibliography makes no reference to Michael Bordeaux and the work of Keston College in supporting Orthodoxy under the Soviet regime. To understand Orthodoxy, he tells us, we need to suspend our Western analytical sense and 'perceive unity and interaction'. He examples the Eucharistic prayer, as we don't need explanations or transubstantiation, but to enter the mystery. 'Heaven on earth' is how many have described Orthodox liturgy. Icons are described here as 'boundary points, marking not the limit but a frontier, a window into eternal meaning'. Their placement is described, but you will need more than is provided here about Orthodox understanding of atonement and resurrection. Two fascinating sections describe how the Orthodox do fasting and confession differently from Western

Christians. Confession includes conversation and discussion between priest and penitent, standing together in a public place. The chapters on music refer to Taverner and Arvo Part and have a useful list of recommended recordings. We need to listen to the music if we are to engage fully in what is described in words. The book balances profundity with practicality and will help readers to do the same.

Peter Varney

Faithful Grandparents by Anita Cleverly, BRF



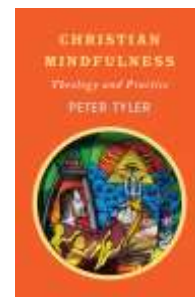
Anita has 35 years' experience in ministry and, as a grandparent, she has written to help and encourage others and hopes that it will provide food for thought .

She shows how the role has changed over the years and provides some humorous definitions of contemporary grandparents with more than a grain of truth. She recognises that it is important that grandparents respect the opinions and convictions of the parents but perhaps she does not give this the prominence it deserves in our modern diverse society.

The Bible is very precious to her and she is anxious that Christians should share it with their grandchildren. She recognises that it can be problematic and that, when it comes to young children, they need to be introduced gradually. There is a lot of material available but care is needed. She looks at some grandparents in the Bible to see what we can learn and then she looks at the church. There is an interesting discussion on the importance of grandparents accepting that society has changed greatly during our lifetime and we must therefore "avoid ever giving any grandchild – child, teenager or adult - the feeling that we reject them because of what they think or do". In the final chapter entitled "What about me? Soul-keeping", the focus is on us and the need for us to look after ourselves both spiritually and emotionally. There is a lot to think about and, through all of this, we are urged to recognise "Our high calling" "which is to love our grandchildren unreservedly and to make this known by our kindness, generosity and words".

Nigel Bastin

Christian Mindfulness by Peter Tyler, SCM



This book has detail and depth and is well worth reading. The starting point is a recognition that Mindfulness is a prominent part of current western spiritual, clinical

and self-help culture and he acknowledges that some have concerns that it is a dangerous import from Buddhism. He is clear that it is no such threat - not only because lessons from other religions and cultures can enhance rather than damage, but also the practice, under other names, is at the heart of Christian spirituality and practice in its many forms and histories. An quote from Thomas Keating offers a context; 'Silence is the language of God, all the rest is bad translation.' He covers four areas; the practice in Buddhism, its current use in the West in healthcare, the Christian prayer tradition and future models of Christian Mindfulness. Each section has practical exercises. He aims to demonstrate that this practice is indeed at the heart of Christian spirituality and does it by a detailed study of Christian spiritual traditions and the work of seminal thinkers and leaders. We hear about mindful silence in the monastic tradition from 'The Cloud of Unknowing' to Thomas Merton. We are encouraged to welcome this revolution and to see it as part of the Christian tradition and integral to prayer. He encourages us to welcome much of what is in Buddhism as familiar. He quotes a Catholic priest who, when asked if Buddhism and Christianity were reconcilable, said 'to be a good human being is to be a good Buddhist'. Christianity, he argues, is a religion of 'mindful activity'. Action is important for the Christian but via Mindfulness 'we can have a glimpse of the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price.'

Christine King

Money and Soul by Pamela Haines, Christian Alternative

We seem to call society community when we emphasise caring and sharing. Doing this takes us in the important direction of examining economics - what is wealth for, how is it created and spent, and is it all



fair? She argues that the Western economic system ‘fosters inequality, promotes greed’ and ‘does violence to people and planet... and compromises community.’ It lacks

‘soul’, meaning Quaker values like integrity, equality, simplicity, stewardship, peace and community. She was brought up a Quaker with an economist father. Later she became an activist in the USA, promoting community projects and arguing for a fairer society. She criticises speculation and oppressive debt policies, ‘bigger is better’ materialism, and progress at the expense of responsibility and justice. Her target is supply-demand and ‘invisible hand’ classical economics, which she suggests makes some individuals and countries rich at the expense of the rest, and generates competition and aggression. Only by ‘entwining’ our lives, possessions, values and beliefs with others in community can a fair and just society be created. Thus, we stand a chance of seeing ‘God in every one’ and acknowledging God in our lives. On the negative side, her target is demonised, the critique lacks detail and the conclusions trail away in generalities and truisms. Nonetheless, her message is well-intentioned and timely.

Stuart Hannabuss

Seeking the God Beyond by J.P. Williams, SCM

J.P Williams teaches at Ripon College, Cuddesdon and the strap line is ‘A beginner’s guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality’. This is no quick read despite the word ‘beginner’, although it is an accessible exploration into what is often called the ‘via negativa’. The Greek origin of the term ‘apophasis’ indicates a turning away from speech and the author’s intention is to explore the meaning and reality of God which no amount of words and concepts and definitions can ever fully grasp.



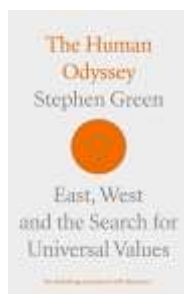
We know from the writings of Marcus Borg and others how limiting is human language when describing God, and Williams

first takes us through some biblical material, notably the experience of Moses of God in both fire and cloud and then in the eroticism of The Song of Songs. I found her brief chapters on the Baptist and Jesus less helpful in addressing this subject. She refers to pioneers of the apophatic tradition, especially Gregory of Nyssa and Meister Eckhart, dips into classical Greek philosophy, references C.S Lewis and the Narnia chronicles and the practices of Zen Buddhism.

The book returns again and again to the practice of meditation, to the importance of stripping, unlearning, unsaying, union, silence and that experience which cannot ultimately be fully captured in words. The chapter on ascent, the notion of meeting with God on the top of the mountain, a metaphor so prevalent in the scriptures, is explored with great imagination by Williams. Overall the thrust and tenor will be seen as a welcome ally to those of us who despair at the way in which churches so often seem to want to deliver a God packaged in doctrinal terms where explanation has superseded the experience of the divine. Echoes persist throughout the book of Tillich’s ‘Ground of all being’ and Julian of Norwich’s emphasis on love capturing the meaning of God. Those readers less convinced of the existential reality of God might nevertheless warm to this approach of inward contemplation and a hatching of the heart.

Adrian Alker

The Human Odyssey by Stephen Green, SPCK



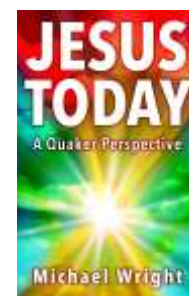
Green is in search of universal values, wondering whether modern geopolitics has irreparably fractured what has been left of them. He targets society and nationhood, the autonomy of self, and purpose and obligation in life.

It is a challenging and reflective journey. An early query is whether urbanised modernity has made the survival of spiritual ideas risky. Picking up on how urbanisation reinforces alienation, he forces us to challenge our ideas about self-awareness and the human place in the order of things. He ranges across traditional European history and religion, and sets out a parallel

narrative about history and religion in China, India and elsewhere. This enables him to explore what kind of universal values, if any, still matter. He is grounded enough to provide plenty of evidence - from Daoism and Confucianism as much as from Islam and Christianity, drawing the conclusion that in all their many ways, the religious and cultural traditions around the world share something universal(ist), and that throughout history most of them have been shaped by geopolitical tribalism. These traditions all probe into what it means to be good and happy, the reliability of the subjective life, and how we choose collaboration or conflict - how in other words, our human journey or odyssey is one of discovery and self-discovery. The spiritual or mystical continues to flourish for all the scientific and materialistic explanations of reality that come forward, probably because of a shared sense of journey. He allows space for faith-based and rationality-based understandings of how human beings interpret the world, and provides a wealth of source material to back up his arguments and challenge readers to take them further. It is a sprawl of a book, rehearsing a lot of familiar territory, but in bringing it all together he offers a stimulating read.

Stuart Hannabuss

Jesus Today by Michael Wright, Sixth Element Publishing



This short and accessible book is aimed at Quakers, but others may find it interesting too. PCN members may already be very familiar with his introduction to contemporary

thinking about Jesus and may well find the book more interesting for the information it gives about Quakers. For example, I had no idea that in addition to Meeting for Worship, Quakers may also attend a Meeting for Threshing or for Clearness (and, of course, a Meeting for Business). But it seems that modern Quakers may have far less time for the Bible and for Jesus than did George Fox and his contemporaries. It is Wright’s mission to reintroduce Quakers to Jesus. There is an intentional congruence with Marcus Borg and his book, “Meeting Jesus Again for

the First Time". The books of Borg and Dominic Crossan are central to his thinking, along with others with whom many will already be familiar: John Shelby Spong, Geza Vermes, Lloyd Geering and Karen Armstrong. Wright puts across these new, modern perspectives on Jesus lucidly and with passion. He revisits the Gospels and reminds his intended audience of the Biblical bedrock of their foundational principles. I do not think there is anything in this book which will come as a surprise to the typical PCNer, but it may come as a refreshing perspective, and as well as reintroducing Quakers to Jesus, he introduces us to modern Quakers.

Jenny Jacobs

One for the Road: A Search for Faith in a Sceptical Age, David Stevenson
£7-, davidelaine9@gmail.com



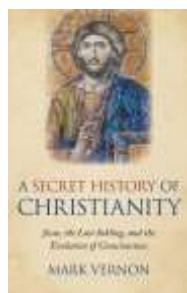
This is an excellent and wide-ranging book of essays, hymns and poetry that could be used as a daily source for thinking and contemplation. It is an exploration of an emerging

Christianity fit for our own contemporary post-modern age, and transcends any specific culture or geography. I have used his hymns and poetry for at least a decade and found them important contributions to progressive corporate worship. He quotes from many different open thinking sources but one that rang all the bells for me was Carl Jung's "Religion is a defence against the experience of God." This book goes a long way towards encouraging readers to engage with the issues raised in the hope that new ways of thinking and doing will emerge to address Jung's critical comment. Although many of the examples used come from his experiences in Leicestershire Methodism they are ably utilised to illustrate universal themes such as 'Church or Kingdom', 'In Love We Live', 'Myth and Mystery', 'This Multicultural Britain', 'On Peace and Justice', and 'Friendship Unbound'. The essay 'The Certain Man' is a wonderful, amusing yet challenging retelling of the parable of the three servants each given amounts of money to invest in the absence of the master [Matt. 25:14-30]. To have a preface by Leslie Griffiths and endorsement

by Jack Spong speaks volumes for the book. It is highly recommended for readers who are searching for a Jesus based faith that is relevant to the age in which we live.

John Churcher

A Secret History of Christianity by Mark Vernon, Christian Alternative



For Vernon, Christianity's secret is that our life springs from God's life, a truth that can only be imparted inwardly and 'must be inhabited to be understood'. The recovery of this

mystical approach is the key to revitalising Christianity. Following Owen Barfield (friend of Tolkien and CS Lewis), he finds this in the evolution of human consciousness. The earliest humans, in the phase of 'original participation', had little sense of a boundary between a person and their environment. This included the time of Homer and the early strata of biblical narrative. About 500 BCE (Jaspars' Axial Age) came a 'withdrawal of participation', a developing sense of individuality and responsibility found in the prophets and Greek philosophy, followed by a third phase, 'reciprocal participation'. In this stage the conscious individuals born of the second phase saw their own interiority reflecting a comparable inner life in nature and in God, effecting a re-engagement. For Vernon, Barfield's 'withdrawal of participation' was the necessary preparation for Christianity and represents its first phase. Its second phase, 'reciprocal participation', is perfected in Jesus Christ's consciousness - expressed in John's gospel as the mutual indwelling of the Father and of the Son and those who believed in him - and highlighted in his teaching that death is the only way to life. For a thousand years the reciprocal participation in death and life through the sacraments sustained this mutuality, but for Barfield and Vernon this came to an end with the reformation and the enlightenment. We are now in a new phase of consciousness, again experiencing withdrawal and alienation, unable to inhabit the essential truth that our life springs from God's life.

Vernon believes the only way to recover consciousness of that

reciprocal participation is imaginatively, and his final chapter refers us to poets, artists and mystics, past and present, for inspiration. I don't disagree, but I found this a rather tame close to a book that was not an easy read, and from which I had hoped for more.

Anthony Freeman

Embodiment by Dinah Livingstone, Katabasis

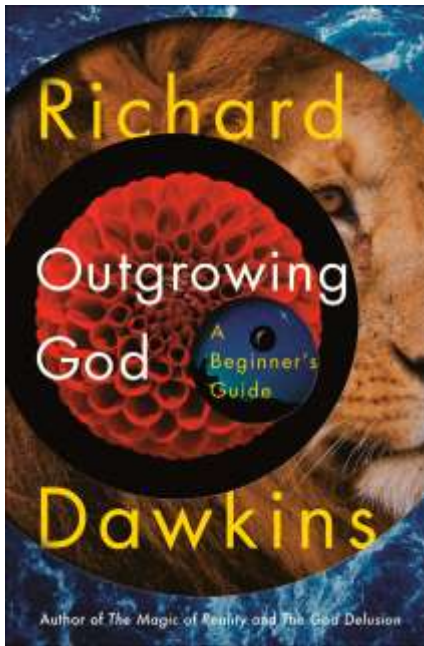


I can't think of anyone who isn't going to adore this slim book of poems. It opens with a preliminary observation that, recorded from space, our planet makes a polyphonic

web of chatter, conversations, songs and stories. Subsequent poems take on voices from many times and cultures; like the Earth they articulate humanity's 'deep hum'. For Livingstone, our species' babble is our USP and our purpose. Poetry, in other words, is the structured 'Embodiment' of our lives. The poet's notion of Embodiment is not very far from that of a theologian's notion of Incarnation, and she stresses the overlaps between states of mind and states of grace. Throughout, the ancient narratives of Creation are rehearsed and interrogated, while she playfully stirs a pot of Biblical interpretations. William Blake's iteration of the Adam and Eve myth is core to the mix, but then so are details of everyday north London graveyards, memories of childbirth and a constant anxiety about getting old and growing frail. Did I forget to say that these poems are also very funny? Her earthy tone frequently contradicts her highfalutin' contents and grounds her metaphysics in the humdrum quotidian. That conflation of tones also emphasises her lesson that human existence follows celestial patterns. In 'Love' for example, she writes: "Though often it involves / hard grind and mess, risks / complications, quarrels, agony, / love is what we cannot do without, / love builds the city". What a good and finely balanced phrase, that combines raw strength with American pulp fiction! William Blake's pre-Revolutionary Adam and Eve would agree: Liberty is Love, but it hurts.

Hellen Giblin-Jowett

Outgrowing God – Richard Dawkins



Richard Dawkins is a distinguished ethologist, author and staunch proponent of new atheism and is well-known to those of us who are interested in the relationship between science and religion. As he makes clear in his dedication, it is written for “all young people when they are old enough to decide for themselves” and it is upon this

basis that it should be judged. The book is divided into two parts the first of which is entitled “Goodbye God” and the second “Evolution and beyond”. Much of the material in the first we have seen before in “The God Delusion” and his other writings. He traces briefly the development of the Abrahamic religions from polytheism to monotheism and questions whether, in view of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Marian doctrines and Satan, Christianity is truly monotheistic. He selects material from the Old Testament which portrays God as being cruel and violent and is equally dismissive of material in the New Testament. Although he notes that contents of the Bible are not literally true, he still seems to rely on it to support his argument. “Whether or not God is a fictional character,” Dawkins argues, “we are still entitled to choose whether he’s the type of character we’d like to love and follow”.

Some of the material in Part Two is fascinating to those of us unfamiliar with biology. Dawkins explains the mechanics of the chameleon’s tongue and the wonders of the eyes of different species including ours. These, we are told, are the result of mutations rather than “an intelligent designer” and we are given examples of bad design including the tortuous and “crazy” route of one of the two nerves which go from the brain to the larynx. The recurrent laryngeal goes via the chest rather than following the direct route taken by the superior larynx and this, we are told, is the result of our developing from fish which have no necks! The wonders of crystals and DNA also feature. The discussion on molecules is given an interesting slant by our being told that every time we drink a glass of water “there is a high chance that at least one molecule will have passed through the bladder of Julius Caesar”! Passing

mention is made to quantum mechanics and the view that our universe is one of many. These wonders all point, in Dawkins view, to there being no God. Not everyone would accept this conclusion and see them pointing to an opposite conclusion. The publishers claim that the book “is a concise, provocative guide to thinking for yourself”. One must respectfully disagree. If young people are to decide for themselves about the existence of God, they must be provided with a balanced view which this book does not give. First, Dawkins’ approach to the Bible is very literal. He concedes that some of it may be symbolic or some form of metaphor which he dismisses as “a favourite dodge of theologians” who choose which verses are metaphors and which are to be read literally. To paint theologians as some group of conspirators is, to say the least, disrespectful of his colleagues in the theology faculty. The Bible was not written to be read literally but should be read as a form of Jewish theological writing which the biblical scholar then uses their knowledge and experience to interpret. Second, the wonders of the natural world cannot explain everything; it simply deals with how life evolves. Indeed, the distinguished American scholar, Stephen Jay Gould, who was an atheist, considered the evolutionary theory as consistent with both atheism and religious belief. Third, not content with jibes about those in the theology faculty, Dawkins is equally dismissive of some of his colleagues in the science faculty. He does not mention that there are distinguished scientists like Revd. Sir John Polkinghorne [Mathematical Physics] and Revd. Prof. David Wilkinson [Theoretical Astrophysics] who hold a different view – indeed he describes those who do not accept his views as “educated “God worshippers” who, he says: “have given up on the living world as evidence of a creator... They have switched, instead, to other kinds of argument.” He continues: “With some desperation – or so it seems to me – they have turned their attention... to cosmology and the origin of everything, including the fundamental laws and constants of physics”. Finally, the author does not provide his readers with any guidance on further reading. To get a balance, one would recommend the books of his colleague, but fierce critic, Alister McGrath. In conclusion, there is much to be gained from a constructive dialogue between science and religion and that dialogue should begin with young people while they are in the education system. Unfortunately, this book, although written for beginners, will not assist that dialogue as it is more like propaganda for Dawkins’ new atheism. One is bound to ask how one can “think for oneself” about the existence of God if one hears only one side of the argument?

Nigel Bastin

Around the manger

Who am I?

The mother, a vessel for someone else's plan?

The father, not the father, standing sentinel?

A shepherd, dirty and bedraggled, a loner from the veld?

A magi, wise and discerning, hoping in star-studded messages?

An angel, iridescent, illuminating and terrifying?

A donkey, nuzzling the manger, hungrily searching for hay?

A lamb, bleating, frightened by the commotion?

Where am I in this nativity tableau?

Is there a place for me around the manger?

Do I even want to be here?

Frozen in time

Sentimentalised on the mantle and displayed in shop windows

Re-enacted with dusty costumes and sullen faces

Petrified symbols or beloved catalysts into the story of Emmanuel?

Emmanuel, then, there?

Or here, now?

Let it be here. Let it be now.

Ana Gobledale



www.christianaid.org.uk/campaigns/climate-change-campaign



<https://greenchristian.org.uk/>



Faith-motivated. Science-informed. Hope-inspired.

<https://operationnoah.org/>



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