

# Progressive Voices

*The task of religion is not to turn us into proper believers; it is to deepen the personal within us, to embrace the power of life, to expand our consciousness, in order that we might see things that eyes do not normally see.*

John Shelby Spong



Dec 2021, PV39

# John Shelby Spong

One of America's best-known spokespersons for an open, scholarly and inclusive Christianity, John Shelby Spong, died Sunday, 12 Sept, at his home in Richmond, Virginia. He was 90 years old.

Bishop Spong was ordained to the priesthood in 1955 and served for 20 years as a priest in Episcopal churches in North Carolina (St. Joseph's, Durham, and Calvary Parish, Tarboro) and in Virginia (St. John's, Lynchburg and St. Paul's, Richmond). In 1976 he was elected VIII Bishop of Newark where he served for 24 years.

A deeply committed Christian, he insisted that he must also speak as an informed citizen of the 21st century. He studied at major centres of Christian scholarship including Union Theological Seminary in New York, Yale Divinity School, Harvard Divinity School and the universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Edinburgh. He was named the Quatercentenary Scholar at Cambridge University (Emmanuel College) in 1992 and the William Belden Noble Lecturer at Harvard University in 2000. He taught at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA; Drew University, Madison, NJ; Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA; The Pacific School of Religion Berkeley, CA; the University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA; and at Trinity College at the University of Toronto.

Bishop Spong was one of Desmond Tutu's co-consecrators in 1976. He ordained to the priesthood the first English woman, the Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Canham, long before the Church of England was willing to ordain women. On 16 Dec, 1989, he ordained to the priesthood the first openly gay man, living in a publicly acknowledged committed relationship. That ordination led to the church's willingness to bless committed gay unions.

While serving at St. Paul's Church in Richmond, VA, Spong, together with Rabbi Jack Daniel Spiro and the University of Richmond's Department of Religion Chair, Dr. Frank Eakin, led a citywide Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Well-known in radio and television circles, Bishop Spong appeared on such diverse programs as Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher, The O'Reilly Factor with Bill O'Reilly, Late Night with Tom Snyder, Good Morning America with Charles Gibson, The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Phil Donahue Show and NPR radio with both Diane Rehm and Terry Gross. He was featured on CBS's Sixty Minutes with Leslie Stahl. He is the author of 26 books, which have sold over 2,000,000 copies. They have been translated into multiple languages. His articles have been published in The New York Times, the Washington Post, The Times of London and others.



He is survived by his wife Christine Mary Spong, who also served as his editor; their five children, Ellen Elizabeth Spong (Augustus Charles Epps, Jr.), Mary Katharine Spong (John Baldwin Catlett, Jr.), Jaquelin Ketner Spong, Brian Yancy Barney (Julieann), and Rachel Elizabeth Carter. M.D. (Scott); and their six grandchildren, Katharine Shelby Catlett, M.D., John Baldwin Catlett, III, John Lanier Hylton, Lydia Ann Hylton, Colin David Barney, and Katherine Barney.

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA**

[www.stpaulsrva.org](http://www.stpaulsrva.org)

*We walk into the mystery  
of God; we do not define  
that mystery.*

John Shelby Spong

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# Welcome

In this issue we bid farewell to a valued, clear, and powerful voice for progressive understandings of Christianity. John Shelby Spong faced anger and vitriol for sharing an understanding of faith that would have probably gone unremarked in British academia, but which shocked the American Episcopalians he served as a bishop.

I first encountered him early on in my preparation for ministry at Mansfield College, Oxford, where he had been invited to give a lecture and rapidly acquired a copy of each of his titles. Later I would meet him again at Gladstone's Library where he led a conference exploring his book 'Eternal Life.' He popularised insights and discoveries hidden in academic tomes, broke them open in his own inimitable style and did not balk at stating what he was rejecting by affirming them.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to him as PCN Britain, both as a network and as individuals, and we dedicate this issue to his memory through reflections, quotes, and a back page listing some of his books.

Welcome to the 39<sup>th</sup> edition of PV.

Enjoy!



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## Remembered

I first met Jack in 2002 at a TCPC conference in Philadelphia Cathedral. I was there with my now husband Hugh Dawes – this was early on in our relationship, which we had kept discreetly to ourselves, him being a parish priest and all that - so being across the pond was our first opportunity to be a couple publicly.

I heard Jack speak and was wowed! He spoke directly to my emotions, experience and understanding of an inclusive God. An excellent communicator, he was a man of passion and integrity, debunking many of the 'givens' in a church which was exclusive of people and so often shut the door on doubters and free-thinkers.

Hugh had been a trustee and speaker at conferences of The Center for Progressive Christianity – the PCN equivalent in the States - for a number of years, having been sought out by Jim Adams, its founder. Hugh had met Jack and Christine before. Much later he owned up to me that on this trip he had sought Jack's counsel about falling in love with me at this latish stage of his bachelor life. Jack's advice was unequivocally "marry her". Which we did – thank you Jack for this blessing!

We both got to know Jack and Christine better over the years in his regular trips to the UK and ours to the States. When Hugh with others set up PCN – Britain, Jack was a staunch supporter, and agreed to speak at its launch in the north (Kendal) and the south (St James's Piccadilly). He of course drew a packed audience at both. Christine was an indomitable negotiator in setting up the trips and whilst here, allowing Jack to keep calm and deliver his wisdom.

Sadly, Hugh is no longer able to write, having advanced stage dementia. I've read this to him and he agrees; his comment about Jack - "a fabulous creator".

With grateful thanks for Jack's influence on me, on us and I know on a great many others.

**Jill Sandham and Hugh Dawes**

*God is not a Christian, God is not a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist. All of those are human systems which human beings have created to try to help us walk into the mystery of God. I honour my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God, I think it only points me to God.*

John Shelby Spong

## Affirmed

The first Spong book I encountered changed my life in validation of its title. *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die* affirmed, and enhanced with authority, what at some level of consciousness I already dimly perceived. It made me believe that my frequent reservations and speculations were not only justifiable but laudable. I felt as though released from a cage. A pleasant enough and resourceful cage to be sure, and shared with congenial companions, but a cage nonetheless. A hitherto church-focussed life now looked increasingly outward to the community and beyond, eager to be a speck of yeast in the dough of the world. An intermittent correspondence with the author ensued.

I met Jack Spong briefly only once. This was in 2009 when he was speaking at St Mark's, Sheffield to his latest 'last' book in which he had used a few lines of mine as a chapter heading. We joined a long queue to speak to him after the lecture, and my first impression was of an unusually tall man. When we eventually reached the head of the queue I introduced myself. Turning to my wife he instantly responded "Then you must be Elaine"-- an impressive feat of memory. If his public image was of a combative controversial character, in that unforgettable moment he was a warm, gracious pastoral figure. The delightful image which appeared on the front cover of PV38 is exactly as I remember him.

"Live fully, love wastefully and be all that you can be" was his oft-repeated maxim. He did that to the full, and it's a joy to know that countless people like me have cause to be grateful to this remarkable man. Rest in peace, Jack. May your influence long continue.

After devouring in a single sitting the manuscript of a little book I produced in 2019, Jack's final gift to me was a generous and insightful comment to embellish the back cover. An expression of my Spong-induced rejuvenation surfaced in 2012 in the hymn *Free as a bird exulting on the wing*.

**David Stevenson**

*What the mind cannot accept, the heart can finally never adore.*

John Shelby Spong

## Accompanied

Jack's books are where many of us first met him. An outstanding writer, every word of his vast output was written with pen on paper. Mind and pen working harmoniously together gave every sentence measured coherence, allowing readers to keep pace with its progression. As a speaker, he was equally brilliant. A commanding figure, his warm, clear voice led his audiences with spell-binding clarity through his careful arguments. He knew just when to lighten things and make you smile, and when to press home an important serious point. With encyclopaedic biblical knowledge he could call up details in a flash when answering questions. As for the message, written or spoken, for thousands the world over it was literally life-changing. At last making sense of what modern knowledge has shown to belong to a bygone age, but which many still cling to today.

Jack did so much for countless searching people but publicly acknowledged that none of it could have been done without his adored Christine. Her meticulously planned organisation of his life freed him to be, in his own words 'all that he could be.' She was his rock and he depended on her completely. But plans can go awry! For Jack, Christine and her daughter Rachel, day 1 of their planned 2006 coast-to-coast walk met disaster on the high Lakeland fells. In torrential rain they lost their way and Jack fell heavily on treacherous ground, damaging his ankle. A Mayday call! Hylton to the rescue! Dinner and beds with us that night. Day 2. The women resumed their walk leaving us with the privilege of looking after Jack until he was fit to re-join them. A valued 15-year friendship was born, leading to subsequent off-duty stays after many UK tours, giving time to climb together our favourite fells with unhampered feet!

Most importantly, throughout his life Jack fearlessly championed the oppressed, from black Americans in segregation days and the church's women, denied equality for so long, to the millions worldwide persecuted because of their sexuality. This courageous public stance led Atlanta's Martin Luther King Chapel to commission a portrait of Jack for their gallery of the world's greatest and, at a special ceremony in 2010, to hang it alongside those of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. It is in their company that the Jack we all love and honour rightly belongs.

**Joan Boothroyd**

*The church is like a swimming pool. Most of the noise comes from the shallow end.*

John Shelby Spong

## Privileged

In October 2002 we attended a conference in St. George's Church, Kendal. The title was "Christianity for a New Age" and Bishop John Spong was the speaker. We walked with him on the path to the church that was lined with people who expressed fundamentalist beliefs. They chanted, "Spong is wrong, Spong is wrong", and when he asked if they had read any of his books they shouted something about them being evil. He invited them into the church to hear what he had to say, but they refused.

Two things struck me. First the insulting rudeness, intolerance and hardness of people who were so convinced of the truth of their understanding that they would not listen to any other ideas. The other was the calm dignity, self-control and compassion of Jack Spong. I was reminded of the account of Jesus and the crowd of people who shouted, 'Crucify Him'. Bishop Spong was a beautiful and wise person whom we felt very privileged to meet.

**David Kemp**

*Unless biblical literalism is challenged overtly in the Christian church itself, it will, in my opinion, kill the Christian faith. It is not just a benign nuisance that afflicts Christianity at its edges; it is a mentality that renders the Christian faith unbelievable to an increasing number of the citizens of our world.*

John Shelby Spong

## Comforted

Jack came to a reasonably liberal church near me in Malvern many years ago, and the place was packed out. His message was radical, quite scary, uncompromising and fascinating - and I didn't agree with it all - but later, as he was talking to people, I told him my father had died very recently and I was feeling very raw. He was pastorally wonderful, sharing my pain and being a comfort, only in a few moments. It belied the fierce image.

**Chris Shepherd**

# Supported

One of the more memorable moments of my ministry in Exeter was the occasion, while preparing for my ordination and induction, when someone said "Oh, by the way, Bishop Spong is speaking at a meeting in the church two days after your ordination. We're hoping you will welcome and introduce him." Talk about the deep end!

At that time, Jack was already a great influence on me and so it was a great honour to welcome him to Exeter. I was much encouraged too by the fact that he was staying in the Moderator's home for the duration of his visit.

During that visit, Jack spoke very supportively of my ministry - just as he did of the contribution LGBT folk make generally to the churches. That was a weekend I shall never forget and proved a great start to my ministry. More importantly, his contribution to progressive Christianity is important and long-lasting.

Iain McDonald

*When a human life is open to all that humanity can be, humanity and divinity flow together as one. It was and is a radical insight, and one the consciousness of the mystic is destined to understand.*

John Shelby Spong

# Graced

I first 'met up' with Jack Spong when viewing a 2000 Conference (of Church leaders, I believe) on television when I was impressed by his grace and humility. Meeting him some years later at a Conference at St Mark's, Sheffield, the same qualities were evident; one was moved by his meek and forgiving attitude to the lady who approached and verbally vilified him, even during his first wife's funeral.

Ruth Bennett

*...death is ultimately a dimension of life through which we journey into timelessness.*

John Shelby Spong



## Walking Forward with Bishop John Shelby Spong

Videod at Holy Trinity Church Windsor, these two DVDs contain the very essence of Jack Spong's approaches to the Bible and Christianity.

Here is an ideal introduction to Bishop Spong's ethos for Christian living or an ideal refresher course of Spong Concentrate!

2-DVD set £10.00 including postage from Chris Avis: 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN (cheque payable to C. Avis) or via Paypal to [chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk)

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

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# With Conviction

Trevor Dorey opened the Newbury group to a stimulating and searching discussion about “What is there in Christianity which still speaks to you with conviction?” with these words:

It was about five years ago that I finally admitted that I could no longer identify in a literal sense with most of the supernatural elements of the creeds and doctrines of the Church; and it came as a great freedom when a learned Bishop, the principal of a leading theological college said to me “don’t worry, my boy, it’s all poetry!”. Since then, what has continued to speak to me with conviction is the teaching of Jesus, found mainly in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer and several parables, and especially his core teaching on the Kingdom. This clearly envisaged a new, non-violent society here on earth, free from harmful divisions of wealth or class or culture or race or religion, in which relationships between all beings and the planet would be based on the single law of love.

I don’t believe for a moment that Jesus envisaged a comfortable, established church; but rather minorities, here and there, of “fools for Christ” as Paul called them, prepared to live Kingdom values now, to be salt and light and leaven; to be counter-cultural in their life-styles and politics; in other words, “to be the change they wanted to see”; and to be prepared for opposition and personal cost. The church of today, in other words, needs, or so it seems to me, to live a life of gentle anger at the way things are, focussing far more than it does on the world’s injustice and insisting that it doesn’t have to be like this. That is the first element of Christianity that still speaks to me with conviction.

The second acknowledges that we can’t be Kingdom people without help or grace or the Holy Spirit, call it what you will. So I believe in the way of the mystics, the prayer of silence, the surrendering of our wills into the great mystery where little by little we can learn to become Kingdom people, and be helped to see the world not through our own worldly eyes but through the compassionate eyes of God. That process is the metanoia or transformation of which Jesus spoke so often and to which the mystics bear witness.

I fail nearly all the time, of course, probably through fear or lack of love, but those are the two things that still speak to me with conviction. I have, I must admit though, cheated a little here. The Kingdom teaching – in my book the core of Jesus’ message, his life vision and the most likely reason for his death - has rarely been a major part of mainstream Christianity. If it had been, the Emperor Constantine would never have adopted Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire! But perhaps PCN can start to put that right.

# Introducing

## Gwen Wills PCN Britain Trustee

I was born in Oxford in 1952, but soon moved with my family to Portsmouth, and it is there I spent a happy childhood. It is still where I call ‘home’ despite having lived in Cornwall for the past 43 years. On leaving Portsmouth



Northern Grammar School I made my career in the Civil Service, firstly in HM Inspector of Taxes, and later in the Unemployment Benefit Office – as they were then. A case of the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away – but the other way round. I was later transferred to Plymouth and it was there I met and married Andy in 1973. Andy is a Cornishman and so when he was offered a teaching job in west Cornwall we were both delighted to make our home in Penzance, and although we have moved around the county over the years, we have never since lived anywhere else, and have now settled in Wadebridge not far from Padstow.

When I was 40 I candidated, and was accepted, for the Methodist ministry. I had a pretty orthodox theology, although back then I would have described myself as being liberal. It was only after retirement, which I had to take early due to a health problem, that I had time ‘to be’ rather than just ‘do.’ It came as a gradual realisation that I no longer believed all the stuff that I had always considered to be essential to be ‘a Christian’ – that there were other ways to encounter God through the lens of the man Jesus. A friend recommended a book entitled ‘Saving Christianity’ by Hilary Wakeman, which was the start of my quest into this exciting and different way of experiencing Christianity. It was later that my daughter, Mo, introduced me to the books of John Shelby Spong, and it was this that saved me from resigning ministry and leaving the church altogether. So I decided to remain in the church until someone chose to throw me out – so far nobody has! I now see my ministry as reaching out to others who can no longer ‘believe six impossible things before breakfast,’ and to encourage them not to throw away the baby with the theological bath water.

Andy and I have now been happily married for 48 years. We have two grown up children, an 8 year old granddaughter, and our daughter Mo (until recently a trustee of PCN) has just presented us with twin grandchildren.

# Chair's Letter

I once knew a parish priest who, when writing his monthly letter to his parishioners in the church magazine, would always insert the initials d.v. at every point – Deo volente - God willing. Conscious of life's unpredictability, he was in effect hedging his comments, aware that any reference to a church meeting or personal plans could be thwarted by unforeseen events. We might not interpret such unexpected happenings to divine intervention but 'd.v.' can be a reminder of the uncertainties and complexities of life. And so, as we went to press in September celebrating Bishop Jack Spong's 90th birthday, we then received the sad news of his death. Rightly so this edition of Progressive Voices is published as a fulsome tribute to Jack's life and work and his huge contribution to the cause of progressive Christianity.

I am writing this letter in November, shortly after my dear old mother's rather sudden and unexpected death, even at her grand age of 104. Born in the midst of war in 1917, her funeral was on Armistice Day this year. November is a sombre month of remembrance, of falling leaves and shorter days. At times it feels as if the Church too is dying, maybe God willing, if it leads to a fresh understanding of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

As someone who loves to garden, I take some comfort from national treasure Monty Don who sees this time of year not as a sombre period but rather the garden's 'new year', when we plant bulbs, transplant, take the final cuttings and plan for the year ahead. Nothing stops, all is dying and living in the great circle of life. In that spirit I take great comfort in the signs of new and young life searching and bringing into being a progressive way of following the path of Jesus. At our final Marcus Borg Memorial Conference it was so good to see and hear those two younger voices from Australia and the USA. Jeremy and Deshna pointed us to see the signs of Christlike love and service in all kinds of contexts and situations. If you didn't Zoom into the conference online you can see it afresh on our website. Older voices such as Jack Spong's may no longer be with us, but the baton is passing to a new generation in different parts of the world. Inclusive communities, some religious, some secular, are showing a radical welcome to people of all backgrounds. Activists working for a more just and peaceful world are inspiring. Climate protestors raging against the spoliation of our planet provide a necessary voice as they speak truth to power.

The church as we have inherited it may indeed be dying, and as Jack Spong predicted unless it radically changes it will die. But PCN can, and must, be part of that change, not on our own but alongside many others, of all ages, who seek a common

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search of value and meaning in life. Like many religious organisations, PCN has an older demographic and the Church, as we know, has a very large alumni association, alongside its ageing congregations. This needs to change, and I am heartened that our present group of trustees are very mixed in age and experience. The time has come for a new and younger Chair to take over this role from me after the AGM. I would hope – d.v! – to continue to contribute to PCN in some specific way, but now is the time to grasp new opportunities, to find fresh ways of communicating and sharing those eight points so central to our work.

The commissioning of our Made of Stories films is an example of seeking new ways of sharing the outworkings of a Christianity focussed on inclusive love, justice and care for all people. In the New Year our sixth film, centred upon the work of Anti Racist Cumbria, will be released. In March we shall hold our first real, actual conference on science and religion. New opportunities, new ways of sharing our convictions – and a pointer to the words of Jack Spong, as quoted on the cover of our magazine, that the task of religion is not to turn us into proper believers, it is to deepen the personal within us and to embrace the power of life.

Generations come and go, and we give thanks for their insights and achievements. But tradition is a living thing and, as I heard in my ordination liturgy some 43 years ago, the gospel needs to be heard afresh in every generation.

*The Christian story did not drop from heaven fully written. It grew and developed year by year over a period of forty-two to seventy years. That is not what most Christians have been taught to think, but it is factual. Christianity has always been an evolving story. It was never, even in the New Testament, a finished story.*

John Shelby Spong

# Letters ....

## Butterflies

Today I saw a butterfly. It was a Red Admiral and it settled, wings open, on a leaf in the warm sun. Instead of hurrying to my next job, I stood and watched it for a while. Such beautiful colours highlighted by the sun, a jewel of nature and I was reminded of Jesus comparing Solomon and wild flowers (Matt 6:28/29, Lk 12:27). Butterflies have a very interesting lifecycle. Eggs are laid, usually sheltered on the underside of a leaf of the food plant. They hatch into caterpillars whose function is to eat and grow. When they reach full size they attach themselves to a sheltered spot and form a hard casing to pupate. During this stage certain dormant cells of the caterpillar are stimulated to develop into the structure of the adult, the energy for this process is supplied by the reserves developed when the caterpillar was feeding. When the reconstruction is complete the outer skin splits and the adult butterfly emerges. It now inflates its wings and when they have dried and hardened, it flies away. The adult stage is short-lived, perhaps one or two weeks, just long enough to mate and the female to lay eggs. Some adult insects do not feed and so they have no mouthparts. The whole process is called complete metamorphosis.

I was entranced. Such beauty; so brief an existence; such extravagance of nature. I was happy yet humbled as I was reminded of the trivia that often fills my thoughts. I remembered a poster I saw many years ago that read, "Happiness is like a butterfly. The more you chase it the more it will elude you, but if you sit down quietly it will come and land on your shoulder".

In that moment I felt a deep contentment; a reminder of rich experiences available for free.

**David Kemp**

### Revisiting Progressive Christianity

I found Greg Crowe's article, subtitled 'Affirmation, Critique and Possibility – Is Progressive Christianity a Thing?' to be enlightening, liberal and rational. The problem, as I respectfully see it, is that Greg would appear to be on the wrong train! Postmodernism has, quite properly in my view, removed all absolutes and metanarratives and

shown us that knowledge is not the key to what life is all about.

Thankfully, Progressive Christianity is no longer required to emphasise someone's judgement as to what is right or wrong or good or evil.

Thanks to pioneers like Marcus Borg and Bishop John Spong, as well as many others, we are now free to truly believe what we like, whilst, at the same time, experiencing the life-enhancing power of love. The Creation story in Genesis reminds us that there were two trees in the Garden of Eden. The Gospel stories would seem to suggest that Jesus was only interested in the second tree; the tree of life. He taught and demonstrated that love for our neighbour is what gives us life and not creeds, doctrines and observances. In short, life is not about knowledge but about love. My respectful suggestion is that we all try and get on the right train and not on the one that travels in non-ending, postmodern circles to nowhere. We should try loving others and see where it gets us!

**Grenville Gilbert**

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  
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## Memoriam

### Hylton Boothroyd



Hylton died of advanced Parkinson's in July in Keswick.

He spent his childhood in a Yorkshire village whose chapel organist started him on organ lessons at 10, leading to a lifelong love of the organ and 70 years of being an organist.

A maths degree from Imperial College led to a working life in Operational Research (OR) - maths

and science graduates combining to solve organisational problems - for the first 10 years in the National Coal Board's OR team and the next 37 teaching OR in Warwick University's Business School.

We'd met as students, married during the Coal Board years and now settled with our 3 children into Warwickshire village life. Top-class music (Birmingham + Rattle), theatre (Stratford) and family Easter holidays in the Isles of Scilly were highlights of life beyond work.

Hylton's OR experience was key in teaching undergraduates the theory and practice of OR and supporting postgraduates in tackling current real-life organisational problems for Royal Mail, or a laundry or a hospital's blood analysis department. So no standard syllabus, rather the excitement of never knowing what challenge would be next. His book of 1977 'Articulate Intervention' was seen as ground-breaking then and is said to be just as relevant today. He stayed happily at Warwick until retirement in 1999.

Sharing retirement in Keswick, with its new theatre, new film club, active charities, inspiring Fairtrade group and surrounding beckoning fells, was very fulfilling. But retirement also brought us the most important thing we ever shared, which came to underpin and enrich everything else. It came in three different but connected life-changing ways.

Firstly, with the sudden departure, mid-term, of our Methodist minister, we inherited his small, fortnightly Contemporary Faith Group.

Secondly, we discovered Jack Spong's books and news of our studies spread to interested local Anglicans and Quakers. Suddenly our small Methodist group became two larger inter-faith groups, still fortnightly, still led and housed by Hylton and me.

Thirdly, this led to our early membership of PCN Britain. In its company, to more Spong we added Borg, Crossan, Holloway, Cupitt and others and fed these back to our eager groups which we led for 12 years.

For Hylton these were golden years of intense exploration, voracious reading, inspiring travel, meeting like minds and rethinking our previous religious understanding. I was privileged to walk with him every step of the way.

**Joan Boothroyd**

# Beware False Prophets

I believe that the CofE is in danger of sleepwalking into disaster. The 'Myriad' strategy, that lies behind its latest vision is a dangerous, exclusive and almost medieval understanding of Christianity that could turn it into a sect, open only to those who believe that they alone can 'know Jesus'. Whatever it may claim, it has only one agenda; recruitment. The marketing may be slick, the music catchy and the young smiling faces attractive, but there lurks a wolf in the website. It's basically a pyramid-selling scheme, with your own guaranteed eternal salvation as the promised reward, and is just as deceitful.

What is billed as a remaking of the creaking parish system, with the creation of thousands of local lay-led groups that will somehow attract a million new believers, is simply an attempt to redefine the Gospel from an extreme evangelical perspective, to the exclusion of all other elements of the 5 Marks of Mission, like humble service, speaking truth to power, and safeguarding the earth. None of that matters when your sole concern is avoiding the fate that awaits the 'lost'. This apparently is driven by compassion: the kind of compassion that would see 99% of the population condemned to hell.

This approach comes from the Centre for Church Multiplication and the New Wine movement. Its cheerleader is John McGinley. I have read his book 'Mission Shaped Grace'. It is largely a series of Bible quotes, (ones about those who thought they were saved finding out the opposite and Paul's image of a diverse body seem to be missing), and stories of divine interventions for those with the right kind of faith. This is not new wine at all of course; it is the same old wine in patched wineskins. 'Jesus saves': end of story. It distorts the Kingdom to only being about the Church, and fails to address any of the questions that thinking people have about the meaning of God, the proper use of the Bible, and the relationship of Christianity to other faith traditions. It is all about 'getting people in' with a complete lack of awareness of what God-ness may be there to be discovered in the world around us. It has little or nothing to do with the real Jesus.



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[www.ben-whitney.org.uk](http://www.ben-whitney.org.uk)

If this works at all, it may only be by recruiting from other churches. Rather like how well-resourced academies poach from schools in more challenging circumstances. It will be very divisive and dismissive of other more sacramental and inclusive theologies. It won't cut much ice in my inner-city church where all are welcome, the God language is inclusive, the table is open and your sexuality is not an issue. Its ministry to asylum-seekers and refugees will go on, and our Sunday mornings will continue to be more focused on how much we value each other, than on trying to divide the sheep from the goats.

What also worries me is that churches who are struggling may be seduced into thinking that this is the only route to renewal. The evangelical church down the road seems to have plenty of people, though often not as many as the promotional language suggests, and not all of them stay very long - there will be a split over some arcane element of required doctrine eventually. But they seem to know exactly what they believe, running to several hundred words, where we are more woolly and unconfident. Their giving is so much more generous, though I'm not sure where it all goes.

In particular, it does nothing to attract those who lead good, caring and generous lives, but who see Christians as self-serving hypocrites, morally elitist, and intellectually naive. If you have to think yourself back into the Middle Ages first and ignore everything that we have learnt about ourselves in the last 300 years, surely most people will still see it all as meaningless and irrelevant?

I have written several (unpublished) letters to the Church Times, saying that the real issue facing us is that most of the traditional claims of Christianity are simply unbelievable to modern minds. A few people will suspend all disbelief on the false promise of their own future glory, but most of us will be happy to return the ticket and simply not bother.

Where is the genuinely new vision of telling the Jesus story, recognising the realities of the world and our place in it? Are all the bishops really on board with this nonsense? Where are the calls for a new Reformation or a new Copernican revolution that doesn't assume our place at the centre of a God's eternal plan? Until we hear more progressive voices, simplistic solutions will appear attractive, at least to some. But if we want genuine renewal, and not just of the Church, there must be another Way.

# Is this not the carpenter?

In his recent book, *The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ* (2021) Canterbury Press, Martyn Percy raised the issue of Jesus' social status. He argued that Jesus was not "*born a poor working-class lad from Nazareth*" but was "*born into a relatively comfortable strata of society*" and "*was from a good Jewish middle-class background*". (p.145-6) Percy suggests that there is support for this, *inter alia*, in the Nativity stories. Thus, Mary and Joseph had their own transport (e.g. a donkey), money to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath, sufficient resources to make regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem and to enable Jesus to train as a rabbi. Although interesting, (Percy also suggests that it is disturbing to Christians because Jesus turned his back on his class and chose poverty) this view of Jesus' social class is not one with which many biblical scholars would agree. C1st Galilee, where Jesus was brought up, was a land of small villages whose inhabitants eked out a living from the land. As Jesus comes from an agrarian society and Joseph was a carpenter, cultural anthropologists (e.g. Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege - A Theory of Social Stratification* (2013) North Carolina Press) and other biblical scholars consider Jesus as being from the artisans / skilled working class whose social status was below that of land-owning peasants. (p.28 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994) Harper Collins) Further, at that time, Palestine was part of the Roman Empire and thus an occupied territory or, as in the case of Galilee, ruled by a puppet ruler. Taxes were high and most inhabitants lived at, or below, subsistence level and many were in debt. Few of the indigenous people could be described as "comfortable". The gospel material which makes up the Nativity Story, while demonstrating a spiritual truth is not factually true; it is a particular form of Jewish theological writing [*midrash*] known as *aggadah*, and, therefore, of no assistance in supporting a factual assessment of Jesus' social status. In terms of his education, Jesus would have learned the Torah by rote from an early age like all young children and, as he grew older, he would have attended the local synagogue to listen to and discuss scripture. One can assume that his skill and aptitude attracted the attention of a rabbi who invited [called] him to become his disciple and receive intensive tuition. This did not involve fees because rabbis were forbidden to accept payment for teaching. They were expected to support themselves or rely on hospitality.

In the gospel accounts Jesus had a trade: he is referred to as "a carpenter" (e.g. Mark 6:3) and "carpenter's son" (e.g. Matthew 13:55). The gospel accounts were written in Greek and, in those accounts, the term used for those who pursue this trade is "*tekton*" (τέκτων) which was a common term



**Nigel Bastin** is a retired legal academic and served as a churchwarden during a twelve year vacancy.

for an artisan/craftsman, in particular a carpenter, woodworker, stone mason or builder. As noted above, many scholars consider this indicative of his coming from a low social class. But does this help us to understand Jesus' position in his society?

To find an answer, we need to remember that the everyday language of Jesus and his followers was not Greek but Aramaic and, in that language, the noun denoting carpenter or craftsmen (*nagger*) was also a colloquialism for a scholar or learned person. This can be seen in a number of sayings from the Talmud. Thus, for example, we are told if a difficult problem was under discussion, the people might ask: "*Is there a carpenter among us or the son of a carpenter who can solve this problem for us?*" or "*This is something no carpenter or carpenter's son can explain*". It is conceded that, as the Talmud was written between C2nd and C5th centuries, that these and other similar sayings might not have been current in C1st, but the view of many Jewish scholars is that they are likely to be age old.

Just because the word "carpenter" may denote a scholar or learned person is no proof that Jesus' father was learned, or that Jesus himself was a carpenter but "*it counts against the common, sweetly idyllic notion of Jesus coming from a family of simple manual workers*" (p.20 David Flusser, *Jesus: Biography of the Life of Jesus* (1998) Magnes Press) and was "*an illiterate peasant*" (The extent of Jesus' knowledge strongly suggests he could read Hebrew (see Luke 4:16-17). Writing was something which required particular skill and accuracy and was the task of the sopher (scribe) who "*looks like a beggar*" (p.65 & 218 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994) Harper Collins). Further, it should be noted that James, Jesus' brother, was the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem and was highly respected for his piety by the Jewish community which, tradition has it, was angered by him being put to death by the priestly authorities. His position suggests that he also was "learned".

The search for the historical Jesus and the growing input from Jewish scholars over the past hundred years has greatly helped us gain a better understanding of his words and teaching. However, what is important to Christians is not whether Jesus was rich or poor, Jew or gentile or black or white but their personal experience of the presence of the risen Christ in their lives for which actual physical appearance is not relevant.

# Lost in ... Hiraeth

In one of my quiet moments, I came across a website which announced “the top 100 words in the vocabulary that adults should know”, and despite the fact that I have now reached the stage in life wherein there are a miniscule number of ‘oughts and shoulds’, I persisted in glancing through the list. Thankfully I recognised 99 of the words and I am now very keen to put ‘androgogy’ into a conversation as soon as possible.

Reading the list reminded me of a Christmas present book from way back - ‘Lost in Translation’ (Ella Frances Sanders, Square Peg); it’s a compendium of untranslatable words from around the world. ‘Lost in Translation’ has a catalogue of words, and some fascinating art work, which are actually somewhat untranslatable. Perhaps these examples tell the story of the book:

‘Tagalog’ - Austronesian language from the Philippines. It means a feeling that you can’t think straight – smiling for no reason; a tingling in your stomach.

And then there’s ‘Vacilando’ a Spanish word meaning ‘travelling, when the experience itself is more important than the destination’.

I am very much taken by the Welsh word ‘Hiraeth’ which, if I understand correctly, speaks of the notion of being homesick for somewhere to which you cannot return; the nostalgia and the grief for the lost places of one’s past and indeed for places that never were.

This notion of being displaced and somewhat without a compass is, I would guess, not at all uncommon amongst members of PCN who have moved away from their church base. I rarely attend church now, but as a lifetime Anglican there remains a comforting mystery as I listen to Radio3’s broadcasts of ‘Evensongs’ from around the UK. It’s the Sunday morning worship slot on Radio4 which most often finds me reaching for the off switch. And indeed, the various denominations of the nation’s church life leave me wondering “how on earth did I ever believe in that?” as yet another evangelist bangs on about the ‘God’ in their pocket.

Nevertheless, the ‘Hiraeth’ walks along my pathways quite often and my memories are charged by good times and good people, particularly those who ‘sat lightly’ to the religious aspects of simply gathering together and talking about life and the rugby results after church.

I am rapidly restructuring my views about ‘God’: my first position now is that God was and is actually female – principally to scare off the ‘Forward in Faith’ movement within the Church of England, and then to go back to my science teaching days and to embrace the notion that God is not a noun but a



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verb. Clearly there’s much erudition to support this claim (most of which is beyond my understanding at this juncture in my life), but nevertheless God as just and simply ‘being’ is a path which will require plenty of conversation.

It is all very well trying to think ‘outside of the box’ or even to walk a new theological pathway, but those church days back then often held deep companionship, as well as caring and available people with whom to share our lives both within church and beyond. Hiraeth is a word for many of us, I’m sure, as we adventure into the future.

And finally, ‘Lost in Translation’ offers the Swedish word ‘Resfeber’, meaning ‘the restless beat of a traveller’s heart before the journey begins – a mixture of anxiety and expectation.’ With PCN we often feel that we are embarking on a journey and cannot sit still – so pick up your backpack, pull on your boots and go boldly into the adventure and the unexpected future which awaits us.

## Cerebrations

To save you looking in a dictionary it means: reflection, speculation or thought. If you come across a quote or a brief thought worth sharing, please send it in: [dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

*Seek not to follow in the footsteps of men of old: Seek what they sought.*

Matsuo Basho, 1644-1694

*Oh, Thou from whom the breath of life comes, who fills all realms of sound, light and vibration.*

(Translation of the first line of what is known as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ - Thank you Don MacGregor.)

*Faithful Questioning, not Unquestioning Obedience.*

Derek Flood

Have you experienced the preaching of Pastor Dawn yet? Highly recommend and indeed commended by Bishop Jack Spong. Google her sermon of 16 May 2021 – ‘Jesus the fully human one’. (Pastor Dawn, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Newmarket, Ontario, Canada).

# Unfolding

O Love,  
Unfold me anew,  
For my spirit easily  
tightens  
Around yesterday's too  
much  
Sadness and loss and  
Worry.

Stretch me open  
With an energy not my  
Own  
But given as the gift of Life  
Revealing beauty within  
Already formed by You  
Before I even knew to notice.

Yes, Love, ground me  
In Your forming grace  
Always at work  
In ways unnameable  
Yet daring to name me  
And everyone, Beloved

O Love  
Unfold me to this  
Noticing You in others  
Trusting Your desire  
To meet every resistance  
I hold as temporary truth,  
Until at last again and again  
I am born anew  
Into a beauty I cannot yet see  
A birth right unbelievable  
Brought to life by You  
The One who is Life

Yes, Love,  
Unfold me anew to this  
And let it be more  
Than enough for today

**David Ling-Higgins**

sourced from [worshipwords.co.uk](http://worshipwords.co.uk)

# Free as a bird

1. Free as a bird exulting on the wing,  
know my word true, embrace the power I bring.  
One with creation, burgeoning in joy,  
accept my peace which nothing can destroy.
2. Boundless my vision – you will try in vain  
to chart its limits, mysteries contain.  
Transcending systems, by the Spirit led,  
drink of life's fullness at the fountainhead.
3. Easy my yoke, my burden ever light,  
I bring good news, balm for the human plight,  
wholeness in living, courage for despair.  
Through depth of being learn to walk in prayer.
4. My service leads to perfect liberty;  
touch here the essence of divinity,  
life in abundance, open to all truth.  
I am the gateway to eternal youth.
5. Truth in encounter – meet me in the world.  
Respond with love. As merchant finely pearled  
give all to own a jewel of great price.  
Delight to share the fruits of sacrifice.

**David Stevenson**

Tune: Anima Christi, William Maher 10.10.10.10

# Guiding Lights

Enlightening God,  
as we reflect on our earthly journeys  
we give thanks  
for all those companions along the road who have,  
over the years, often unwittingly, opened windows  
or even doors of enlightenment,  
illuminating our paths,  
sharing their prayers, thoughts, words and deeds,  
sometimes just through books, hymns, films ...  
deepening our understanding of who you are  
and how we can live positively,  
despite the difficulties.

We pray for awareness of the Spirit's guidance  
when you need us  
to allow the light of your love  
to shine out through us,  
illumination the dark journeying  
for our companions along life's road.

**Ros Murphy**

# Life in all its fullness

“I am come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10.10 NRSV)

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10.10 NIV)

It sounds simple enough - until one tries to understand what life actually is and what is meant by “abundance” or “fullness” of life.

A quick look in my dictionary is enough to reveal the many different ways the word “life” is commonly used, and whole books have been written dealing with the way life is understood by scientists. Viruses are regarded by some as the simplest form of life, while the boundaries between someone being alive and dead are seemingly very tenuous in some medical situations. Life involves biology, chemistry and physics with much potential for cross-fertilisation between disciplines. Quantum Biology, for example, is a relatively new field investigating the ways our understandings of quantum mechanics can be used to assist our understanding of biological processes. In other areas of research “artificial life” is the focus. How then can we distinguish between “abundant” or “full” life and any other sort of life? The opportunities for subjectivity seem countless. It seems to have been recognised, for example, that our understanding of nature is influenced by the way we observe, measure and test it. To put it another way, what we learn about nature is dependent upon how we choose to question it. This appears to suggest that while human beings have the intelligence to devise various protocols and methods of testing, we will never be able fully to escape our own subjectivity. Is it reasonable, therefore, to expect human beings ever to be able to agree a universally accepted understanding/definition of “life”?

One of the strongest perceptions we have seems to be that of relationship with all that surrounds us. We each seem to be part of something beyond our perception of self, and we perceive other entities (other people, at least) that embody respective perceptions of self and relationship. Our powers of intercommunication seem to reinforce these perceptions. This suggests we are each part of a system that embraces us all and is capable of generating various human perceptions, depending upon how relationships within the system are experienced. Since we tend to perceive life as being transient and continuously changing, from birth to death, we each seem to fulfil a respective transient function contributing to the nature of the system. This seems to be reason enough to regard each and every life as having unique importance. Further, if we are able to describe ourselves as having intelligence then we are similarly able to ascribe this



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property to the system, since we are part of it. Similarly, if we are able to describe ourselves as having life, then should we not be able to ascribe this property to the system? We can however never fully comprehend the system since the amount of information capable of being contained in a mere component can never equal the amount of information contained in the “whole”.

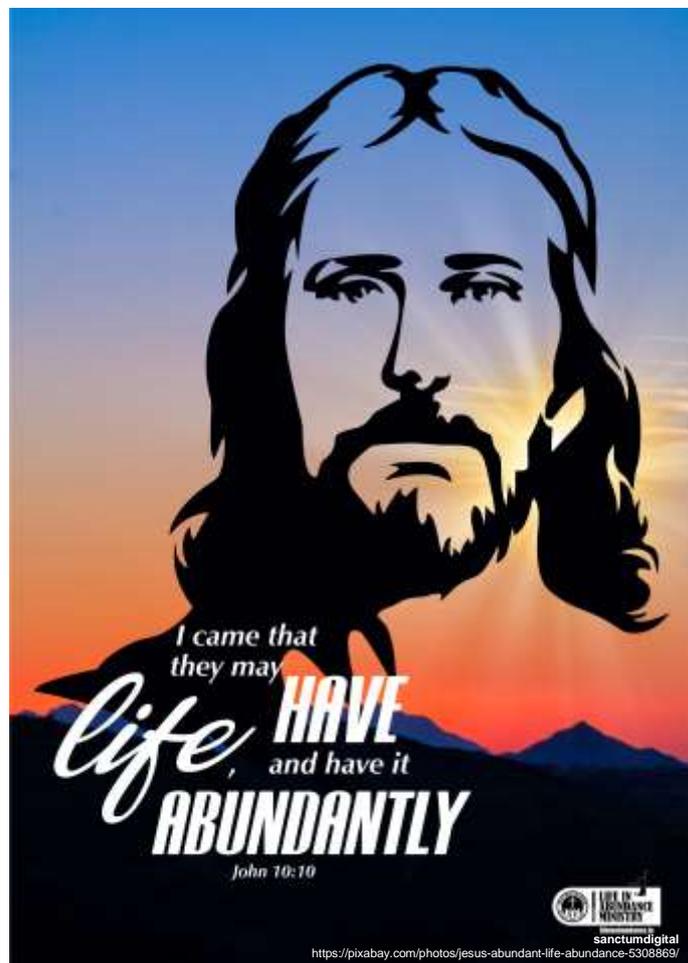
I suggest that the story of human evolution and our own personal development can be seen as parts of the story of the development of the “whole”. While I am tempted to substitute “Universe” or even “Multiverse” for the word “whole”, such limitation of the term may be unwise (bearing in mind the potential human subjectivity involved in arriving at our understandings of these terms). Any boundaries the whole system may (or may not) possess may best be regarded as very prone to speculation and human subjectivity and are probably way beyond the human ability to understand and describe any way (given the quantity of information likely to be involved). It might be argued that at any one point in time the nature of the “whole” will have been determined by the story of all its parts up to that point in time, and that this gives each of our lives a significance way beyond a focus merely on our respective perceptions of “self”. Our understanding of “time” or “Space-time” may, however, need to be born in mind when formulating this argument. If we are able to focus on optimising our relationship with the other parts of the system, that together with us make up the “whole”, perhaps we can contribute to its optimisation, even though we may never understand exactly what that means. If the way we engage with the world around us gives us a perception of diminishment, that may be the only feedback available for motivating us to change our focus. Scientific investigation would seem to be an invaluable tool for informing this perception, and when combined with other tools available to us (such as philosophy and mathematics) can help us chart a way forward with at least some degree of integrity. If the example of love-filled engagement with the system, shown by Jesus, generates a perception of improvement, or just improvement potential, then perhaps this should be sufficient to motivate us to focus on his example. When combined, however, with scientific evidence of the benefit of taking care of multiple life forms (human

and non-human alike - viruses excluded perhaps), and the environment we all inhabit, as well as of the environmental benefits resulting from social justice, perception can be significantly reinforced and the motivation increased to the point of compulsion. Perhaps then we will indeed be able to maximise our contribution to optimising the “whole” and “fully” and “abundantly” value our part in a seemingly continuing story.

It may help therefore, when reading John 10.10, in a modern context, to think of “life” in terms of relationship with the system of which we are a part, and to think of the degree to which that relationship is filled with love (the desire for optimisation?) as a measure of its abundance/fullness. What then of the thief, that comes to steal, kill and destroy? (It should not be forgotten that John 10.10 draws a distinction between the thief and the sheep, to whom abundant life is being offered, and who, according to preceding text, have not listened to the thief.)

An important part of the evolution process, through which many think we obtained our intelligence, is natural selection. This term sounds rather innocuous but in practice means the demise, often brutal, of species, that do not have a survival advantage, in favour of other species that do. It is not difficult to identify in this process “stealing” - of vital resources (e.g. by stronger species from weaker species), “killing” - of rival individuals (in the same or different species), and “destruction” - of whole species (e.g. through disease) and parts of the environment. While natural selection has also given rise to social development (survival advantage found in combining forces, and organisation for common benefit) destructive, competitive instincts still seem deeply embedded in our psyche. Now human intelligence has enabled us, as a species, to devise the means of our own demise through such things as weapons of mass destruction, all too efficient over-exploitation of limited natural resources, and all too effective production of waste products which damage the environment upon which our continued existence depends. Our intelligence also enables us, however, to understand the implications of what we are doing, devise ways of controlling our actions in the face of our natural instincts, and rectify at least some of the errors we have made. Human beings seem to have a propensity for personifying things. Anthropomorphising pets is commonplace as is imbuing inanimate objects with human properties and identities (“God bless all who sail in Her,” “Thomas” - the tank engine etc.). Countries become “The Motherland” or “The Fatherland”, and “love” and creative process (dare I suggest?) become “God”. Are “Satan”, “The Evil One”, “The Devil”, and “The Thief” our species personifications of sensed, residual, destructive evolutionary instincts?

The ability to care for other members of our species



may have its origins in the evolutionary drivers that conferred a survival advantage on those species that could care for their young and/or benefit from the social cohesion that resulted in numerical superiority in conflicts, hunts for food and the like. Caring for other humans, however, can give rise to other benefits. The most obvious, perhaps, are the improved ability to defuse potentially dangerous conflicts, and the promulgation of common goals for the purposes of collective benefit. Caring for other life forms and our shared environment is increasingly being seen as generating a distinct survival advantage but one that benefits many species other than our own. Evolution may have provided the mechanism that gave rise to Homo Sapiens but the resulting human intelligence and self-understanding may confer the ability to now turn off the self-destructive drivers, recognise our role in an all-embracing system and optimise our relationship with the other components of that system. For me, the paradigm of a man, who truly valued others, showed people a way (albeit metaphorical - but what else could it be?) to relate to an incomprehensible system, of which knowingly or otherwise they were a part, and whose death on a cross made the lasting point that love and forgiveness were the antidote to self-destruction, and the route to optimal living, when seen in historical and cultural context, sits quite comfortably with an evolution/science-based (and yet very human) understanding of “life”.

# Unholy / holy - thoughts about Prayer

Does the practice of praying, I wonder, excite, intrigue, worry, embarrass or (perish the thought!) simply bore you?

## A personal confession

From the outset, I confess that for as long as I can remember, praying has not really been my 'cup of tea'. I am a thinker, communicator and do-er, rather than a pray-er.

In spite of my intellectual caution, I have sometimes found myself praying with passion: when a loved one has been worryingly ill, before an important exam or interview, or in the anxious night before my open heart surgery. But in the ordinary run of life, I am consistently at the bottom of the holiness league in terms of organized praying.

While sometimes feeling guilty about my struggles, I comfort myself by noting that praying zeal and stamina are not necessarily reliable markers of good discipleship. Some of the apparently greatest prayer zealots – among them hugely popular and wealthy tele-evangelists in America and elsewhere – turn out to be hypocrites, abusers and fraudsters.

## Reassurance from the Bible

There's also solid comfort in the Bible. Paul repeatedly insists that each of us has particular gifts, implying that we shouldn't expect to shine at everything, maybe prayer included. Who did Jesus commend in the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector? Not the religious leader who prayed at length thanking God that *he* wasn't greedy or dishonest, let alone an adulterer, but the tax collector with his one-liner 'God, have pity on me, a sinner!' And the Lord's Prayer (a later summary of the essence of Jesus's teaching?) implies that vision and values are more important than eloquence and duration. What's more, there's far more teaching in the gospels about the Kingdom of God than there is about prayer.

## A crucial feature of faith

Whatever my personal hang-ups, I realize prayer is a deeply entrenched aspect of religious faith, seemingly going back to prehistoric times. Judaism gave great weight to it in synagogue and Temple. There are moving blessings in Hinduism, profound meditations in Buddhism, and praying five times every day is one of the pillars of Islam.

From its inception, Christianity has given prayer a key role in its faith and practice. Its scriptures tell of Jesus regularly withdrawing to pray. While the cry in Gethsemane 'Your will, O God, be done, not mine' may well have been an accurate record, the so-called Great Prayer of John 17 is surely not a verbatim report? Was there really someone within earshot and equipped to write in shorthand? And does it really read like a prayer? Would the man



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

who refused to be categorized, let alone labelled Messiah or Christ, claim in prayer that 'eternal life means knowing Jesus Christ, whom God sent'? Like the rest of John, this chapter expresses the heavily edited memory, developing beliefs and hopes of the Johannine Christian community some seventy years after Jesus's ministry.

Prayer, it is widely held, has sustained the Church throughout the vicissitudes of history. The Hebrew Bible, supremely the psalms, has inspired prayers of praise, confession and petition, even if now we generally resist asking God to clobber the wicked. Whatever the origin of the Lord's Prayer, people in their hundreds of millions regularly say it. And some branches of Christendom still try to maintain a super league of devotees who commit to a life of celibacy and prayer, even if some of them find the strain too much and indulge in abusive behaviour.

So prayer clearly is an integral facet of religious faith. Yet I still have my niggles.

## How great thou art?

Take prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Counting our blessings can haul us out of self-pity and grumpiness. But when we offer God a paean of praise, I sometimes find myself asking: can I sincerely adore and extol a god who may well do wonderful things in terms of creation, transformation and inspiration but has *also* made a world wherein suffering and misery have been endemic since the evolution of life? Does God, conceived as the cosmic C.E.O., deserve unqualified adulation - being told in a popular hymn some sixteen times 'How great thou art!'?

## Are we really 'miserable offenders'?

Prayers of confession can be good for the soul, making us aware of our failings and galvanizing us to do better tomorrow if not today. But are we really 'miserable offenders', *always* messing-up as so many liturgical prayers assume? Surely the holy spirit of God deserves some credit for our many good and kind thoughts, words and actions!

## Praying for others

My biggest problems arise when it comes to prayers of intercession. Of course it's right to focus on the needs and wellbeing of others. Ideally, the very process of such praying should activate our imagination, deepen our empathy and strengthen our resolve to benefit both people and planet. Yet I

can't help wondering if prayers for others make an *objective* difference? Just how might the mechanisms of our brains influence the lives of those we pray for? What role might God (Being or being, 'real' or 'non-real', noun or verb) actually play in facilitating our heartfelt wishes?

Studies of the therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer vary widely in their conclusions, some affirming but others denying the practice promotes beneficial outcomes. Maybe the process is too subjective and opaque for science to penetrate and assess. We should certainly beware the trap of asserting something *cannot* happen because we do not currently comprehend how it *might* do.

Moreover, if 'God' really does refer to an actual omnipotent, omniscient Being, it is reasonable to argue that God could choose to intervene and manage human situations.

However, if God truly is almighty, all good and all loving – as traditional theology asserts - the same uncomfortable question that prayers of praise can evoke resurfaces with prayers of petition. Isn't God too often unfair and unjust? Families pray for loved ones to be healed and a gravely-ill old scoundrel sits up next morning for his egg and bacon and a three-year old girl with a brain tumour closes her eyes for the last time. Some prayer zealots readily overlook this apparent divine capriciousness, 'praising the Lord' for performing a miracle when someone makes a spectacular recovery while insensitively oblivious to others who have prayed with equal fervour yet suffered a shocking loss.

### **'Lord, help us catch the train!'**

Believing we can persuade, if not lobby, God to do what we want raises questions not only about the nature of God but also moral concerns. My wife and I were walking to our local railway station when a kind neighbour stopped his car and offered us a lift. We accepted but were soon caught up in a traffic jam. As the clock ticked on, our driver decided it was time to pray. 'Lord, we just want you to make sure we get to the station in time so that Mary and Edward can catch their train.' And we did catch our train with only seconds to spare. Prayer answered! The snag is though, had the train been delayed (in answer to our neighbour's plea) many passengers would have been inconvenienced, missing connections or late for appointments. God's favour for you may also be someone else's plight!

### **A few *holy* thoughts**

Despite my niggles, I *do* believe that prayer *in some form* can be enriching personally and communally. Taking time to reflect on our values, goals, attitudes, conduct and relationships and offering them to the transforming power of the holy spirit of Goodness, Truth, Wisdom, Beauty and Love, alive or latent within us all – offering spirit, mind and body to the reviving Energy of God – is surely desirable. Of



National Gallery of Art, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9d/Jacopo\\_Guarana%2C\\_Three\\_Studies\\_of\\_Hands\\_Clasped\\_in\\_Prayer%2C\\_NGA\\_69369.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9d/Jacopo_Guarana%2C_Three_Studies_of_Hands_Clasped_in_Prayer%2C_NGA_69369.jpg)

course, just how we pray will vary according to our beliefs and personalities. Some of us may like to allocate times and places while others find meaning and inspiration through the practice of mindfulness (being alert to the beauty and joys of the present moment or location).

The language we use in both private and public prayer will naturally reflect our particular beliefs. If you conceive of God in personal terms, you may be happy to address your prayers to Father God or Gracious Lord or Saviour Jesus. If you conceive of God in more conceptual terms – as Spirit or Wisdom or Light or Truth or Love - you will frame your prayers very differently. God is variously envisaged in personal and conceptual terms in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. But it seems to me that conceptual ideas of God resonate more convincingly with contemporary thinking about the nature of reality and our prayers should reflect this.

### **'The soul's sincere desire'**

Let James Montgomery have the last word for he surely offers a crucial signpost in the opening of his hymn, and with that 'tweet' from another century, it's over to you:

*'Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,  
uttered or unexpressed'*

# Local groups

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

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

We have been recalling the life and work of Bishop Jack Spong. We still remember with gratitude his visit to us in 2003. He spoke to an audience of 200 in a school hall and our group founded shortly afterwards. It was a stimulating evening which gave us the permission to keep thinking for ourselves! At that time Jack was very busy making speaking tours, and we were very impressed that he chose to visit us. Currently we are thinking about what being progressive as Christians might mean for what we actually do rather than what we say. As an extension to this theme we intend to explore what being a progressive means for followers of other religions. As we are continuing to meet via Zoom, keep an eye on our web page for the meeting topics and do get in touch if you would like to join in any of our meetings. We shall continue to meet on the first Tue each month for the next quarter.

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

We are now meeting face to face again at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. Members of the group who live at a distance or, for whatever reason, wish to join us via Zoom can now do so. A link is sent out a day or so before each monthly meeting. Our meetings continue to be on the first Wed of each month, 1.30-3pm. We are currently reading through and discussing Robin Meyers "Saving Jesus from the Church".

**Exeter** Liz Vizard  
01392 668859 liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are scattered across Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. Pre-Covid we would gather three times a year in Exeter, but when the pandemic started we were somewhat uncertain about Zoom. With encouragement from others across PCN, we decided to have a go, just to have a chat and see how folks were feeling. We asked if people had remained in touch with their own community or found one online, discovering a

variety of connections – Peedee church, Orkney, Westhill in Toronto; St James' Piccadilly, to finding theology in Grayson Perry's Art Club. There was an assortment of books being read and it was a pleasure to see one another. We repeated it in April and 20 of us discussed films, books, and the effect nature had on us during lock down.

We decided to invite a guest speaker to join us in June. To our delight the Revd Dr Susan Durber, URC minister and Moderator for the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, agreed to talk with us on the 'Parables of Jesus: Proper Jewish Stories; New (Old) Ways of Reading'. We had a challenging, informative and most enjoyable time with her. Our gathering in July was again on zoom. We discussed 'A Theology of Holidays'. Several agreed that living in retirement often means the end of holidays as such! Possibly holidays stultify the mind, whereas travelling expands the mind?

The final gathering this autumn was the first one face-to-face, and we invited members of the Pagan Federation in Devon to talk about 'Paganism and Christianity'. The speakers were delighted to have such 'a large audience'. We were challenged about stereotypes and some searching questions were raised, perhaps leaving some needing to understand more, and others rather bemused. As we move into winter, zoom will no doubt be our favoured option.

**Gloucestershire** Andy Vivian  
07966 985339 andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk

In Jun we enjoyed a talk by Free to Believe chair, Martin Camroux. He said modern society no longer had a shared religious narrative. The notion of an interventionist God is morally outrageous, yet he testified to feeling the grace of God and encouraged us to give thanks. We spent the summer talking about '10 points' posted at a Kent church describing what it means to be open and affirming. We heard moving stories about the efforts of churches to provide an open welcome, helping those who suffer pain or injustice. During the autumn we read Sonya Wratten's book, Christianity and Feminism. We were split on whether

Jesus' masculinity might be a problem. Then just what is meant by masculinity and femininity? At our most recent meeting Nicky von Benzon probed our thoughts about how to deal with life's 'borderlands' – places where nations or cultures intersect. She used the stories of Ruth and Naomi and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman to illustrate an approach. We still meet on Zoom, and hope to be 'in person' in the New Year.

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

During Covid restrictions we did hold a few sessions on Zoom, but did not find these terribly satisfactory, although it did at least keep people in touch. It was good news when restrictions were lifted and the church where we meet permitted groups to use its premises. We recommenced face-to-face meetings in Sept and it was gratifying that a good number felt able to attend once again. We explored attitudes towards death and our preparedness. In Oct we had a session looking at some other aspects of Paul and his part in early Christianity. In particular we tried to rehabilitate him from some of his bad press by identifying negative statements e.g. about women, as coming from letters probably not written by Paul. Nov will be the final meeting for this year and we intend to examine varied beliefs in the afterlife from biblical writings.

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

We began in Sept with a pleasant social evening in a member's home, where we brought a poem, a reading, or a thought, to share. The spread was wide, from ancient wisdom to modern humour, and we heard some fascinating pieces. We are now almost 'back to normal' for our evening meetings at Brunswick Methodist Church, enjoying the space in a larger room but bringing our own refreshments. For our Oct meeting, we prepared by listening to the 'On Being' podcast of 29 July 2021, entitled, 'What we inherit and what we send forth'. This conversation between Krista Tippett and Rev Jen Bailey, friends of different generations, explores belonging and healing now and in the future. We took the opportunity to continue those themes in our own conversations, finding out more about each other as we listened.

We look forward to our Nov evening, discussing the books, blogs and thoughts of Richard Rohr and to our aptly titled Dec one, 'Making Room'.

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

We have made a slow start to resuming physical meetings and, after our away day in Aug have managed only one meeting by early Nov for a variety of reasons. However we are now ready with a programme of fortnightly meetings on Tue afternoons in Oakham Methodist Church stretching to our break at Easter 2022. Having regard to live issues in both the Methodist and Anglican churches, we have decided to spend some time looking at the Anglican course 'Living in Love and Faith' between Dec and Feb. We are aware of some of the reactions to the issue and wish to be better informed.

**Rugby** Nicola Phelan  
01788 562562 nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk

A small group has continued to meet on Zoom monthly, whereas prior to the pandemic we met every two months. This has enabled people who can't get to meetings to join in, including those who have moved away, so we will continue to use it. The infection rate is still of concern so we don't anticipate meeting in person till next year as a regular event, although we have an informal gathering planned in Nov in an open space in a church with a cafe. Following discussion of all the PCN films we have since discussed a range of topics, including how the pandemic has affected our faith and practice. A member found a number of resources online relating to empathy and compassion and another followed this with questions on the role of silence in good listening and faith practice. We looked at how we relate to the Bible using John Barton's review of the book 'The Bible with and without Jesus. - How Jews and Christians read the same stories differently' by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, as a starting point. In Sept and Oct we discussed the papers from the Spectrum Conference with the theme 'Darkness and Light are both alike to thee'. We had varied experiences of how we respond to physical darkness and explored at some length how we have been shaped by metaphors of light and dark in the

Bible. Other groups may find this resource helpful for discussion. In Nov we will discuss Johnathan Clatworthy's lecture 'Imperial theology and the Nicene Creed' available: [modernchurch.org.uk](http://modernchurch.org.uk)

**Tavistock** Mike Dennis  
01822 618142 mikedennis\_uk@yahoo.co.uk

During the last lockdown we continued to share zoom sessions taking the Made of Stories films as our themes. We even had contact from some outside of our area. However, we were pleased to start meeting face-to-face again in Sept especially as a new member without internet access was able to join us. I circulated a list of books and DVDs/CDs that I possess and am willing to loan. The new member made significant use of them prior to the end of the last lockdown. In 2020, we had hoped to lead up to Easter with Jack Spong's sermon "He did not die for our sins" but were forced to cancel the session. We recommenced our meetings with it just a few days after his death. Our Oct session is planned to be a public showing of "Thank You for the Rain" in order to stimulate thought prior to COP 26. As not all members had the opportunity to see all of the Made of Stories films, we propose to view them again with wider numbers in Nov and in subsequent sessions. We will definitely look forward to the next film in the same series.

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

We are still meeting on Zoom, although hope to resume meeting at the Friends Meeting House in Great Ayton soon. We're working through Jonathan Sacks' "Morality: restoring the common good in divided times". We meet on the second Tue of each month at 2.30pm.

**Woking** Fred Pink  
07889 200078 fred.pink@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are still using Zoom and it works well as several of us aren't local. We have had excellent meetings discussing Don MacGregor's book Christianity Expanding, culminating with an enthralling session with Don himself. In our last two meetings this year we will be looking at Our Shared Humanity and Buddhism. We meet from 9.30- 11.00am on the third Sat on Zoom and, one day, back face to face at Trinity Methodist Church, Brewery Road, Woking, GU21 4LH.

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

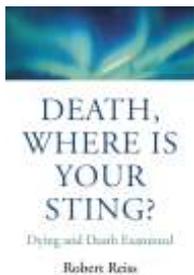
We have availed ourselves of online PCN material to good effect. We caught up with the remaining films and shared thoughts. We found them well worthwhile. We recently tuned in to the interesting talk by John Bell on "The Importance to Faith of the Imagination" organised by the Malvern group, which we able to join with, and also the Borg memorial conference on "Hope for the Future", with Deshna Shine and Jeremy Greaves from the US and Australia. We will be meeting together during Nov to talk about all these. In Sept we joined together physically for the first time post lockdown. We reflected generally on our church-going activity. This had been prompted on my part by listening to a service on Radio 4 from the City of London, on the theme "Back to the Square Mile". That service had embraced beautiful music, the familiar message of comfort and encouragement for the faithful, as well as prayerful concern for those less fortunate – which is what we all know as normal. But somehow, coming as it did from what we might call the seat of the establishment, we agreed that it can strike a rather complacent, even hypocritical, note given the big challenges that exist. How easy the words, no doubt earnestly meant, but meanwhile the world carries on! What does our church-going add up to for us as individuals in terms of addressing our social and economic concerns? Churches avoid anything deemed to be political. For some of us that is a constraint when we face injustice and need in the world around us. Religion has been described as an ethical activity. Our thinking about God reflects our personal religious ideals. We don't necessarily think of our ideals as God-given.

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

We are looking forward to our Nov meeting when we will watch and discuss Patrick and Davey's Story. In Dec we will discuss the work of Jack Spong, beginning with his book "Christianity Must Change or Die". We are still meeting on Zoom. If anyone would like to join us I can send a link. Perhaps our Jan/Feb meeting might be a hybrid with a limited number here at Honley and everyone else still on Zoom.

# Reviews

**Death, Where Is Your Sting?** by Robert Reiss, Christian Alternative



I came to this with hope. Questions about death and, by implication, life thereafter, are important to me and I find them often sidestepped as irrelevant. We often revert uneasily to

metaphor or denial and dismiss any 'hope' as outdated and misguided. Neither takes us forward to a new understanding of what has been historically core Christian teaching. He has written this scholarly book as a response to his own search for understanding of the question of death and its meaning in the light of both contemporary theological thinking and science.

He gives us some really interesting historical perspectives, including those from ancient beliefs and philosophies and pre-20th century Christianity. There are chapters dedicated to Jesus' resurrection, to near death experiences, an analysis of contemporary secular trends and a review of Christian thinking on the subject since 1900. In the midst of a fascinating read, this chapter made the biggest impact on me. We have a summary of the thinking which underpins contemporary liberal theology. Key questions include what is meant by eternity, whether we need to think of body and soul as separate, whether we can speak of eternal life for us as individuals and indeed what can we believe about God in the light of ever increasing scientific discoveries. He bravely concludes with a statement of where his own beliefs rest after his journey of exploration. His conclusions on the issue of the 'afterlife' I find challenging. His personal journey to get to this point provides an invaluable summary of theological thinking on this issue and is fascinating and thought provoking.

**Chris King**

**Mediating Faith** edited by Michael Bailey and Guy Redden, Routledge  
This collection of academic studies is largely designed to counter the impact of 'death of God' and secularisation theories by showing how religion "continues to play a role in shaping political ideologies,

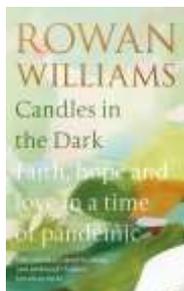
institutional practices, communities of interest, ways of life and social identities," and how it interacts with contemporary social and cultural developments. The contributions are grouped together in four main sections: Mediation, Consumption and Lifestyle, Youth and Politics and Community. It brings together scholars from a wide range of disciplines including,



among others, communication studies, media studies, cultural studies, gender studies, history, anthropology and even musicology. Their research covers issues such as religious broadcasting, religion and the internet, spirituality and health, youth culture, popular religious music, religion and the commodification of everyday life as well as case studies of the ways in which various religious movements have interacted with the media, culture and politics. Christianity and Islam are both well-represented, but apart from one study involving an ultra-orthodox Jewish community and mention of New Age movements, there are no studies drawn from other major religions. Each of the four sections has an introduction by the editors which puts the contributions in their theoretical context. All in all, this is not a book that will appeal to the general reader, but it is a very useful academic resource for religious studies with interesting individual studies, comprehensive reference lists, and a sound theoretical base.

**Alastair Smurthwaite**

**Candles in the Dark** by Rowan Williams, SPCK



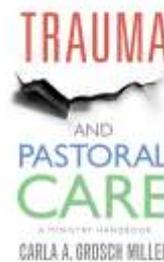
Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writes well for the ordinary Christian reader and these are his reflections on 2020 for his local church. It was a time of trial and change.

His reflections are intimate, sincere, and personal, allowing us to imagine the other conversations held in the church at the time. He speaks to all of us because our fears are not over. He turns to God for help but tells us that faith is no mere amulet. He can transform the trite into the

memorable, the complex into the transparent. Here we find insights into the challenges of change, being grounded in faith, facing mortality, interrogating power, transcending self-interest, valuing tradition, nourishing community, and the mystery of the Ascension and the inspiration of Mary. He reflects on events, asking how Christians can respond. Candles suggests that faith communities really do have the energy, with God's help, to do this effectively. Candles light the way as symbols of hope and love. His reflections guide us towards fuller spiritual self-confidence and humanity. A quick but deep read, and a book to share.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

**Trauma and Pastoral Care** by Carla A Grosch-Miller, Canterbury Press

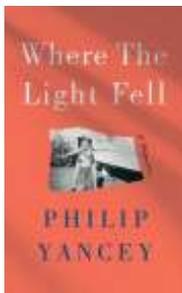


This book aims to help churches, and pastoral leaders in particular, by providing guidance on how to respond when trauma comes. It is a distillation and adaptation of

material from a congregational project which appeared in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations* (Routledge 2019). It has been helpfully realigned for practical pastoral use, and takes three related points of view – the individual, the community or collective, and wider society ('life and faith'). Grosch-Miller has local ministry experience and took part in the project. She explains what trauma is and how we should try to understand and respond to it. Her focus is authentic and watchful empathy, knowing we can give only what we have, accepting how we all cry out in pain when trauma strikes. In this way we can provide healing for brokenness and share recovery. Her checklists for facilitators and advice on using Bible narratives and forms of liturgy are all very grounded and useful. She alerts carers to negative as well as positive forms of help, and offers excellent sources to follow up. Her case for pastoral care is well made and avoids pious privileging. A good book even though printed on poor paper.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

**Where the light fell** by Philip Yancey, Convergent Books  
Philip Yancey is an American

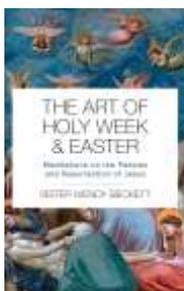


Christian author whose books have sold in their millions. This one is a rather painful family memoir, written in the present tense for extra impact.

The book opens with a description of his father's death from polio and how his mother, imitating the OT figure Hannah, offering both her children to God - vowing to raise them both to serve as missionaries. Things do not work out as she hoped, and a major theme is how this poisoned family relationships, especially between her and the eldest brother, Marshall. Another theme is the damaged caused by growing up in a racist and fundamentalist church and feeling the odd one out in a Bible college where students essentially put on an act, repeating trite religious phrases such as "God is giving me the victory" while all the time the reality of their lives is the opposite. Books, music, science and the wonders of the natural world sometimes disperse the gloom, but circumstances always thwart chances of any real change. Once they leave Bible college (both end up at Wheaton College) their lives take very different turns. Helped by an authentic religious experience, and finding a kindred spirit in his wife Janet, the author goes on to become a Christian writer, but the focus of the bulk of the rest of the book is on the self-destructive course his brother's life takes. (He experiments with about every alternative culture / lifestyle going and considers suicide on more than one occasion.) The final chapter is a poignant mix of apparent failure and hope. Although their mother begins to try to make amends, Marshall is too bruised to respond and is well into the new atheism movement.

**Guy Whitehouse**

**The art of Holy Week and Easter by Sister Wendy Beckett, SPCK**



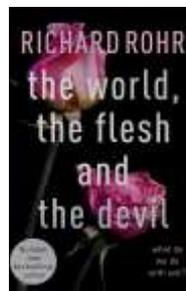
A book of just 70 pages, illustrating the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus, with a postcard sized reproduction alongside a page of text for each scene.

The 30 images are well reproduced by the Turkish

printers. Readers will know Sister Wendy's engaging style, drawing them into the details of each scene, and opening their minds to make new discoveries. Details such as how the light and shade are used enhance appreciation but it is the passion and depth of commentary which brings everything alive. Readers will have in their hands are some of the finest paintings from Western art, with some lesser known paintings. Don't wait until Lent; this can be an aid to contemplation or prayer at any time! It gives readers a way to reflect on the beauty and challenges of each painting, and to find in the less known works how they too may speak to us as they did to Sister Wendy.

**Peter Varney**

**The World, the Flesh, and the Devil by Richard Rohr, SPCK**



These 125 pages summarise much of his earlier writing, and is rather easier to understand, giving a fresh approach to what Christianity has understood as the sources of evil: the

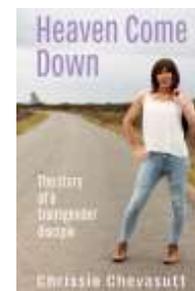
world, the flesh and the devil. Rohr suggests that for Paul sin 'is a word for the basic absurdity of life on this earth' and makes a strong critique of any focus on individual evil, and particularly on sexual immorality. Rohr's strongest words are about those who have made a decision for 'Jesus as Lord and Saviour' but are incapable of critiquing their surrounding culture, and have no sympathy for anyone outside their limited group. 'Their goodness is too small, the private self and its salvation is still [their] only reference point.' He suggests only a few groups, the Amish and Bruderhof, are able to live selflessly, but manage this by enforced conformity and homogeneity. Rohr summarises Jesus' way as a quiet refusal to participate in external power structures or systems. For Jesus and Paul the gospel is not a utopian vision but a transforming strategy that includes all humanity in the healing and repairing of the world. At the end Jesus surrendered to the systems of both empire and religion by allowing them to judge and murder him. Jesus is their victim and Rohr suggests this is the most cogent explanation for his death.

The main focus is on the way evil is expressed in communities and institutions and how sin shows itself in social, cultural or historic entrapment. Rohr writes that we must live a vulnerable life finding universal solidarity not private salvation, holding responsibility rather than blaming others.

The penultimate chapter summarises Cynthia Bourgeault's work based on 'third-force thinking'. This comes from Gurdjieff who posits that the three forces of affirming, denying and reconciling all need to be engaged with for any movement to find a way forward. For Rohr the redemptive plan of God, the Atonement, is 'the pattern of order, necessary disorder, and a new order at a higher level. 'Holy reconciling', equated with grace, is the quality to transform, and allow a new consciousness to arise. A good model for the Church of England as it considers how to hold LGBT+ people within its community. Readers will find here wisdom and compassion, and a 'holy affirming' of their calling to repair the world.

**Peter Varney**

**Heaven Come Down by Chrissie Chevasutt, DLT**



Subtitled, The story of a transgender disciple, this is an account of the author's own roller-coaster life of lows and highs. 50 pages in, I was screaming for an editor to cut the

repetitions and inconsistencies and halve the book's 300 pages. Another 50 pages, and I saw I was wrong. Despite the datelines attached to the chapters, this is not a progressive biography with a beginning, middle and end. It's a collage, with layer upon layer of rejection, self-hatred, addiction, searching, finding, false dawns, and suicidal despair. It shifts everywhere - Chilterns to Himalaya, country to city, London to Delhi, Tibetan Buddhism to evangelical Christianity - yet gets nowhere. The repetition and muddled chronology express this frustration.

The driving subtext is our author's rejection and hatred of her feminine self, born into a male body. Until this changes, nothing changes, and for decades everything militated against such change. In particular, she had no words to talk about it. Those

closest to describing her situation were “transvestite”, a practice cursed in Deuteronomy, and “schizophrenic”, a fear that haunted her. Only in her fifties did she find some relief as a community emerged, offering a measure of support and understanding. A few saintly individuals aside, the church - not least the CofE - comes out very badly. It is Jesus, not “Christianity”, whose call to discipleship Chrissie has answered. Yet defiantly she has returned, as a transgender advocate, to a church that rejected her, the church where (as Paul), she married still-loyal wife Pam thirty years earlier. The book’s Foreword calls this “a story of redemption”. I find that over-optimistic. A story with welcome redemptive aspects, yes; but so far no happy endings. Throughout, the present is interpreting the past, and the dysfunctional past is ever-present. No episode is over and gone; the story inhabits a timeless present. As I write, transgender frictions still make the headlines: the Tavistock challenged in court for interfering with puberty; MPs in the conflict between feminists and trans advocates; not to mention church pronouncements. Sadly, I foresee more painful layers in the collage before the completion of this transgender disciple’s story.

**Anthony Freeman**

**Communicate for Change by Genelle Aldred, SPCK**



Four big ideas challenge the reader here – how we communicate, why there is a need for change, what forms of justice should be supported, and how various forms of bias get in the way

of success. Her stance is that: ‘as a Black woman, the need for a more just world is very personal’; and that ‘her aim is to prioritize the societal progression of Black people.’ As a communications professional, she argues that too often conversations about social justice are confrontational rather than leading to solutions. Often they weaponize prejudicial words, ignore individuality, reveal little cultural intelligence, set out to manipulate emotions, expect others to do the heavy lifting, and are shaped by the unrepresentative and privileged who

are all too ready to take offence. As a result, women are stereotyped and disadvantaged, and Black men and women regarded as ‘other’ and in hostile monolithic ways. The case is made in chapters with titles like ‘fake news’, ‘blind spots’ and ‘power truths’, arguing that objectivity and fairness, unconscious bias and systemic ideology are all at work in White self-serving narratives, often male ones. Long-overdue challenge comes when Black men and women realise their self-worth, and when society grasps nettles like slavery in British history and ethnic discrimination in employment, education, and policy. More can be achieved, she says, if we stand up for ourselves, say what we mean, and deliver on what we promise. SPCK has bravely published a book that comes from the heart and speaks to readers who know woke and cancel culture, charity clickbait and the distortions of privilege: they will buy and read it.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

**Church Going Gone by Brian Mountford, Christian Alternative**



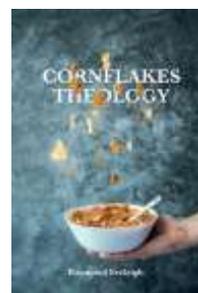
Mountford’s account of his life and work as an Anglican priest from the late 1960s to 2016 is an entertaining, humorous, and yet thought-provoking read - despite its weighty-sounding

subtitle of “a biography of religion, doubt and faith.” He does not avoid dealing with serious issues: divorce, homosexuality, HIV/Aids, child abuse, drugs, suicide, Margaret Thatcher. They are all there, but they are treated with a gentle and sometimes poignant touch. Mountford is not one for the heavy hand; he sees that as all too often a problem with “churchy” religion. Since his retirement, he “now and then” sits in the church pews for a service and asks himself “why people bother to go to church at all when it is so dull and out of touch and takes as long as necessary to say what it wishes to say.” He is similarly critical of dogmatism, rigidity and growing managerial control. In his interpretation, Jesus was a disrupter, a “maverick leader” and, although he describes himself as surprisingly theologically conventional, he nevertheless contends that “religious energy can

be generated at least as well by creative risk-taking as by stolid respectability.” And he certainly tried to live by that belief: from setting up a bar in part of the parish hall and other “non-proselytising community projects,” to infusing his ministry with poetry, drama and music, and fostering open discussion and debate. He tried to reach people where they were arguing they “look to the Church for a grounding in Christian values and the occasional glimpses of transcendence.” Despite the dwindling congregations, he believes that there is still a widespread yearning for faith; the key questions of life have not gone away. This is an enjoyable, encouraging and insightful read.

**Alastair Smurthwaite**

**Cornflakes Theology by Raymond Eveleigh [www.revray.co.uk](http://www.revray.co.uk), £9.99**



Raymond set up his Cornflakes Theology group in 2011 to ask hard questions. How can we be ‘honest to God’ without being gullible? After all, we could query our way into

disbelief – faith is not easy. The ‘cornflakes’ metaphor derives from his friend Mary, who, after an interrupted but thoughtful night, wrote down her doubts and fears on an old cereal packet. It’s a tricky metaphor – apt if we’re wondering how best to highlight key Christian ideas without distorting them, worrisome if we ask whether ‘the church’ can be as good as Kelloggs in promoting its products. The website includes clickable ‘snacks’ like ‘living with questions’ and ‘love and discipleship’. The questions asked are good and based on the Bible, its history and interpretation. They are presented in two parts – a short course for discussion groups and a theological backdrop, making it good for local use. He encourages us to see the Gospels as distinct texts, how the early church faced disputes, why the Cross provokes controversy, how Messianic prophecy can be misconstrued, and how theologians open up our current understanding. The secular world raises questions of its own for Christians, but that should not make Christians afraid to raise their own about their beliefs.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

# Two Trees: the subversive nature of love

Of the two trees in the Garden,  
the first one is better known.  
It's about knowing good and evil,  
and it sets the Bible's tone.

Sadly, the tone is still with us,  
despite all Jesus did and said.  
We continue to judge one another;  
as if the other is already dead.

It's what's enabled the Church  
to gain its power and its wealth;  
telling people they're all sinners,  
controlling them by stealth.

Rules for all occasions;  
laws of every kind.  
Creeds, doctrines and observances;  
in Church not hard to find.

But, there were **two** trees in the Garden;  
of the second, Jesus had no doubt.  
It had nothing to do with judgement;  
life's what it was all about.

The Sabbath was made for man  
and not the other way around.  
Mosaic laws now redundant;  
love the only law that's found.

Love is not about judgement  
or about what's right and wrong.  
It's not even about good and evil;  
it's about that for which we long.

Love involves compassion for others,  
for the world in which we live;  
even love for our enemies  
and those difficult to forgive.

For love is the source of life;  
whilst laws are based on fear.  
And love includes forgiveness;  
'*Arbor decora et fulgida*<sup>1</sup>'; makes it clear.

For it's the **second** tree really matters;  
the one making all creation free.  
Nothing we need to be 'saved' from,  
in order to obtain our liberty.

Jesus understood the meaning  
of the story of the two trees.  
For God is 'Love' of the living  
not some idol for us to please.

It's time to reverse the emphasis  
from spurious claims about a Fall;  
to sharing in the divine nature,  
Christianity really **is** good news for **all!**<sup>2</sup>

Grenville Gilbert

1 'Arbor decora et fulgida', 'the beautiful and shining tree', is a reference to the cross as a symbol of love for all.

2 I am indebted to Professor Keith Ward for the phrases in the final verse which come from his most recent books, 'Sharing in the Divine Nature' and 'Parables of Time and Eternity'. I thoroughly recommend them both.

