

# Progressive Voices



June 2016

Bradley Witham

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# Layers of meaning

Like many people, I enjoy visiting our National Gallery of Art in Trafalgar Square. Discerning the layers of meaning of many of its paintings is fascinating and a worthy project for those with time to spare. In the past, art has played a major role in educating a predominantly illiterate people about the Bible stories. Paintings, sculptures, and stained glass windows have all helped to inform over the centuries, to the extent that many onlookers have assimilated the images, mainly at the literal level, and drawn faith from the stories.

Such an example is the painting known as 'The Agony in the Garden' (about 1480)

by Andrea Mantegna. Whilst the disciples sleep, angels bear the instruments of the Passion to Jesus who is at prayer. In the background, however, are soldiers led by Judas Iscariot, who are coming to arrest Jesus.

For at least 500 years many observers would presumably understand this picture as they saw it. In the night Judas betrays Jesus to the authorities and leads them to plant the fatal kiss on his cheek. Even nowadays many still regard this as how the 'betrayal' took place, recognised every Good Friday and perpetuated year by year.

As someone who cannot accept much of the literalism of the Bible stories I could never understand why it was that Judas needed to approach Jesus in the night to point him out to the authorities. Surely Jesus was well known – he had caused a disturbance in the Temple and had a growing reputation for outwitting the Pharisees? He could have been 'taken out' in a more public arena. I'd like to thank more progressive voices, like Borg, Crossan, Spong and others, who nowadays give us much more to think about. We now have scholars who can help us to uncover further layers of meaning.

Another helpful historian is Bart Erhman who suggests that Judas was one of the insiders to whom Jesus disclosed his vision for the future. Erhman writes about how Jesus, a Galilean peasant, eventually became 'God' in the eyes of early Christians many years after his death. During his lifetime he suggests that Jesus was an apocalyptic messenger who preached the end of the world and the coming of the Son of Man, and that Judas knew this from private conversations with Jesus. He informed the authorities and this was all they needed to



'The Agony in the Garden' (circa 1480) by Andrea Mantegna

arrest him. The rest of Judas' story was simply made up to add drama. Thus the painting does not simply depict the meeting between victim and pursuers, but conveys a deeper understanding of Jesus and his message.

Bishop John Shelby Spong goes much further and says that Judas is a created character. He suggests that the reason for the creation of the story of Judas was to be a symbol of the very nation of Judea; a midrashic attempt to shift the blame of Jesus' death from the Romans onto the Jewish nation. In this way a condemnation written into the New Testament of thousands of Jews in the following centuries, a dark cloud that must to be lifted.

I would now like to view the painting by Mantegna with more insight. Should I? Maybe Mantegna himself had no idea of Judas' real character other than what he gained from the New Testament writings, as so many orthodox Christians do. I am fortunate to live in an age when scholars, and in particular progressive ones like Borg, Crossan, Erhman, Spong etc., can lead us into the future and away from the literal past.

## Bibliography:

B. D. Erhman, *How Jesus Became God*, Harper Collins, 2014  
J. S. Spong, *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy*, Harper Collins, 2016



**Brian Parr** is a retired teacher, still tutoring in science, and interested in Biblical Study. He is a member of the Birmingham PCN group

# Welcome

As this edition comes out we will be in the closing days of the EU referendum debate before we go to the polls on the 23rd June. Whatever is decided this will be a major point in our history, and I hope that progressive voices will have been heard amidst the interpretations, rhetoric, spin, scare-mongering, xenophobia and all that seems to fill our modern political debates.

In this edition we continue some of the ideas from last time, reflect on our day honouring Marcus Borg and look forward to Brian McLaren visiting us in the autumn. We ponder extinction, euthanasia, and the possibilities of sustainable development and the universe. There are book reviews to get you thinking and worshipping. We also hear from our Welsh speaking brothers and sisters.

As always contributions are always welcome. As a suggestion you may wish to ponder Progressive Christian practice. Explore how we live it out, what we do and what we should be doing.

Welcome to the 17th edition of Progressive Voices.

Enjoy!



## PCN Liturgy Task Group (LTG)

This group has had its first meeting and has begun to look at all the contributions PCN has received over the last few years.

We are now coming to terms with different computer systems, other commitments and methods of assessing what we mean by the words "radical", "progressive" and "liturgy". If anyone has any thoughts on these they would be most welcome to contact the group via me, Tony Rutherford: [tony.rutherford@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:tony.rutherford@pcnbritain.org.uk)  
01892 541009

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

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

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

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

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

Publication is at the discretion of the editor:  
[dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Copy Deadlines:

**Sept: Friday 12th August 2016**

December: Friday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016

March: Friday 10<sup>th</sup> February 2017

June: Friday 12th May 2017

# Letter from the Chair

To friends across PCN Britain .

When I was a parish priest, so often my letter in the church magazine began, "Dear friends...". The form of address was sincerely meant, because I understood the local church to be a community of friends who loved and supported each other, and walked together along the Way. Of course, as with every community and every family, there would be disagreements and different points of view which is all part of the journey. I very much experience PCN Britain as a community of friends, and I say this in the wake of a number of visits I have made to PCN groups across the UK and after the very successful conference in Birmingham to honour the work of Marcus Borg.

Long lasting friendships and relationships are often born out of respect for the other and a shared set of values, convictions and hopes. This is clearly so in an organisation like ours, framed around those principles in the eight points. We know how religious faith can so often seem to put its beliefs and practices ahead of care and compassion for its own followers, let alone for others beyond its affiliation. Together I am sure we want others outside PCN to recognise our community of friendship and to join us. The sixth of those 8 points says that we are people who '*know that the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of our faith*'. Wouldn't it be good if every church and chapel, diocesan office and theological seminary, inscribed this conviction on to a central welcome notice board!

Such a sentiment was echoed at the Diana Butler Bass conference when we were privileged to watch a video message from Marianne Borg, who, at the end of the video reminded us all of a blessing which Marcus often used:

*Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us.*

*So be quick to love and make haste to be kind.*

*And the blessing of God who loves you be with you this day and always.*

This blessing you will find again at the foot of Dave Coaker's excellent summary of our day at Birmingham, and I make no apology for its double entry. It is worth it.

And yet the Jesus of compassion and kindness, whom many of us profess to follow, also had a passion for God's justice, if I have read the New Testament aright. This leads me to consider our network to be a community of friends, yes, but a community which at times has some pretty harsh and critical things to say about our world and our society. At our annual

general meeting in Leeds in March we watched the film, *The Divide*, which led us to discuss the chronic level of inequality in British society as in the USA. We took in the statistics, we shared our experiences of the issue, and we recognised the problems which many of our fellow citizens face. And? What next? What was missing at the Leeds meeting, partly for lack of time, was any discussion about political endeavour in changing our society for the better.

There are many Christians and people of other faiths who are engaged already with issues around poverty and inequality, and many of you may be members of Church Action on Poverty or a political party. I am sure there are PCN members involved in helping in food banks and in many other supportive ways. Our progressive Christian movement, which so often endeavours to distinguish between the Man for Others and the emergent cosmic Christ of the doctrines of the Church, needs to continually spell out what being inspired by this man from Nazareth really means.

Much of our time in group discussions, in conferences, and in our articles, is quite rightly spent arguing the case for a re-imagined Christianity; which was so splendidly enunciated by Marcus Borg, and more recently by Brian McLaren. But alongside such discourse let's not forget the eighth of those 8 points: *To work together within and beyond the Church to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.* I hope people will come on board with PCN for their desire to work for a just, peaceful and sustainable world, as much as they do to engage in arguments about religious belief. Perhaps PCN as an organization can associate itself with initiatives and causes which signal our intent to work for justice, as for example we try to do by our being a member of the Charter for Compassion.

Finally a personal thank you for so many kind comments about my book, '*Is a Radical Church Possible?*' I wrote it partly as a group resource with questions after each short chapter, and so I hope it will be a useful addition. Certainly I have enjoyed lively debate so far on my visits about the nature of radicalism, and what that might mean for the churches!



**Adrian Alker** serves as the  
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# Compassion

## Charter Tool Box

The Charter for Compassion International has developed a framework for building a Compassionate Community. In many ways, the model is similar to other models for organizing a community-building effort. The objectives are usually related to the well-being of the community, e.g. improved healthcare, decreased crime, increased assets for youth, economic improvement, and increased resilience. The difference in the Charter's model may be understood as a difference in perspective and intention. Those working to create Compassionate Communities are moved through empathy to compassionate action - a desire to address pain and suffering wherever it occurs - not only in their own communities but in all communities and for all living beings everywhere.



Grounded in the concepts of the Charter for Compassion this model is intended to guide your process, and to provide a place to begin. It can and should be adapted to the unique circumstances of any community seeking to become a Compassionate Community. Each of the four broad phases includes more specific steps along with stories and examples that you may find helpful and even inspiring. Phase 1: Discover and Assess; 2: Focus and Commit; 3: Build and Launch; 4: Evaluate and Sustain.



Within the Charter Tool Box, you will find a rich and valuable resource for those who are building Compassionate Communities.

You are encouraged to make use of these useful tools as you build your own Compassionate Community.

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

## Solas Festival

**Festival of music, arts and discussion.**

Fri 17 - Sun 19 June, near Perth in Scotland

PCN is sponsoring the Peace Tent.

[info@camasenterprises.com](mailto:info@camasenterprises.com) [www.solasfestival.co.uk](http://www.solasfestival.co.uk)

## Enneagram Workshop

**Led by Rev'd Dave Tomlinson**

Fri 8 - Sat 9 July at Carnon Downs Village Hall,  
Tregye Road, Carnon Downs, Truro, TR3 6GH

£40.00 (includes Tea & Coffee)

[richard.gray@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:richard.gray@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Performing the Faith:

**Shakespeare in the World**

**Shakespeare, the Theatre and Theology Today**

11-13 July at High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire

£220 ensuite, £165 standard

[www.modernchurch.org.uk](http://www.modernchurch.org.uk) 0845 345 1909

## Silence by the Sea

**A UK Wisdom School led by Don & Jayne  
MacGregor and Janet Lake**

26-29 Sept at The Othona Community, Coast Road,  
Burton Bradstock, Bridport, Dorset, DT6 4RN

£225 (or £200 concession), deposit £30

[www.othona-bb.org.uk](http://www.othona-bb.org.uk) 01308 897130

## Is a Radical Church Possible?

**Rev'd Adrian Alker**

Sat 22 Oct, 2.30pm, £5.00

Oadby Trinity Methodist Church. LE2 4LA

Oadby and Market Harborough PCN Groups

Gerald Gardiner: 0116 271 3869

[gerald.gardiner@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:gerald.gardiner@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Bishop John Shelby Spong at the Church at Carrs Lane

Sat 29 Oct at The Church at Carrs Lane, Carrs Lane,  
Birmingham, B4 7SX

[office@carrslane.co.uk](mailto:office@carrslane.co.uk) <http://carrslane.co.uk/>

## Maidenhead lecture

**Bishop John Shelby Spong**

Sunday 30 October 2016

£10; £7 for seniors, students and PCN members

[sathindsbc@waitrose.com](mailto:sathindsbc@waitrose.com) 01753 858123

[johnshelbyspong.com](http://johnshelbyspong.com)

# Borg Memorial Lecture

With few seats to spare we gathered in the Church at Carrs Lane, Birmingham, from PCN, Modern Church, Free to Believe and St Mark's CRC to honour, remember, and celebrate, the late Marcus Borg on Sat 14th May.

Our time together was led by Diana Butler Bass who had initially met Marcus briefly as fellow congregants and then as a colleague, fellow-traveller and friend from 2004. She had become aware of him earlier. The head of the department she found herself in following completing her doctorate, denounced his book 'Meeting Jesus again for the first time' in a lecture. This 'commendation' led her to purchase a copy, and to her eventually seeking other employment. It was also this copy that she lent to her future husband following their first date. Her friendship with Marcus was sealed when the publisher they shared, HarperOne, suggested they meet for lunch in Sept 2004. Her first book, 'Practicing Congregation', and Borg's, 'The heart of Christianity', were going to print. The lunch lasted four and a half hours with them exploring their common observation that there were corners of vitality in liberal and progressive communities where there was engagement with social justice, rich discussions, questioning, and a fresh exploration of Christian practices. Marcus had termed this neo-traditional liberalism, where tradition is engaged with openly and flexibly.

Following Marcus' death Diana was a speaker at the conference held at Trinity Church in Portland in the autumn of 2015 entitled: The unending conversation: Progressive Christian apologetics for the 21st century. She outlined the 'script' of Progressive Christianity, as expressed in the USA, as including social justice, historical criticism, science, history, social sciences, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue within its understanding, and its opposition to Fundamentalism. She argued that what Marcus Borg added to the script was immanence and experience, in other words, mysticism. She termed this neo-transcendentalism, seeking to re-engage mainline churches that were culturally isolated and focused on the mind and morals, with the divine as an integral presence to be personally engaged with. She observed that because of this Marcus was challenged by his NT colleagues who thought him too mystical and churchy, as well as by evangelicals for their own reasons. It may have also been why he appreciated his time with churches so much. Marcus answered intellectual questions and opened a door to the divine seeking to reclaim experience, mysticism and an immanent sense of God through both nature and neighbour.

Diana led us into her own response to this by beginning with an exploration of American 'nones'. They being those who associate themselves as: atheist/agnostic, secular (with no religious inheritance), and unattached believers. In contrast to statistics of Church decline

she presented upward data for spiritual experiences. She posed the question: what if we are living in the age of mystics and not really 'nones'? She then told the story of the Calvary monastery which was forced to leave its elevated position overlooking a valley and make its home in the city below it, as a parable for where the Church finds itself in western culture. The Church is no longer high above and removed, it is now intertwined with culture. Diana outlined her research into sermons from key traumatic events in American history. She observed that it is not until 9/11 (11 Sept 2001) that the questions raised alter from God's intention and our response, to one of the most consequential questions of our times: Where is God? She then put before us the image of God as an old white man in the sky, an image which is a construct of the 3-tier biblical universe which underpins western culture. She then played with this vertical image making the argument that the Church is the lift, with specially ordained lift operators, the various contents of the lift God sends down are set tradition, with the sole purpose of ensuring that eventually we get to ride the lift up. Our whole worship, our hymns and prayers, are filled with this 3-tier language which may be metaphorical now, but its origins were literal. The next image we saw was one she had discovered when visiting Cambridge showing how cosmologists see the universe, and there is nothing vertical about it. (See page 23.) She stated that 'The Church we inherited is incoherent with the nature of the universe', and that 'we cannot hold on to a God for a universe that doesn't exist.' She concluded with the argument she makes in her book 'Grounded', that God is with the world through nature and neighbour, which is a sacred ecology, and, (a metaphor she only thought of after publication), a spiritual Mobius strip (a surface with only one side and only one boundary). Seeing God with and also at the horizon, just beyond us and always moving. The change being from a distant God of a vertical universe to an intimate God hovering at the horizons.

We had hoped that we would be joined by Marcus' widow, Marianne, but due to an injury trying to separate her dogs she was unable to be physically with us. She was with us in the gracious, warm-hearted and thought-provoking video she had prepared to thank us for being there and to introduce Diana. It was a day of thinking, questioning, laughter, reflection and fellowship. A day that truly embodied the spirit of Marcus Borg. A day that was a blessing, and I share that with you using words of blessing by Marcus, that Marianne offered to us:

*Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden  
the hearts of those who travel with us.  
So be quick to love and make haste to be kind.  
And the blessing of God who loves you be with you this  
day and always.*

**Dave Coaker**

# Introducing Brian McLaren

Often cited as one of the most influential Christian leaders in the West, Brian McLaren will be speaking on his upcoming book, 'The Great Spiritual Migration: Re-imagining a Faith that will Save Us' during his UK tour between 8th –15th October this year.

He calls for the era of the Church being change-averse and self-protecting to end. He invites open-minded Christians to undertake the task of shifting the faith to be more in sync with its founder. He asks what it would mean for us to rediscover our faith - not as a system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of living.

Brian is an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. A former college English teacher and pastor, he has been active in networking and mentoring church planters and pastors since the mid 1980's. He is a popular conference speaker and a guest lecturer for denominational and ecumenical leadership gatherings across the world. His talks cover a broad range of topics including postmodern thought and culture, Biblical studies, evangelism, leadership, global mission, spiritual formation, worship, pastoral survival and burnout, inter-religious dialogue, ecology, and social justice.

He is primarily known as a thinker and writer. His first book "The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix" (1998), has been recognised as a primary portal into the current conversation about postmodern ministry. This was followed by:

- "Finding Faith" (1999), a contemporary apologetic.
- "More Ready Than You Realise" (2002), an approach to spiritual friendship.
- "Adventures in Missing the Point" (with Dr. Anthony Campolo) (2003), theological reform in a postmodern context.
- "A Generous Orthodoxy" (2004), a personal confession and "manifesto of the emerging church conversation".
- His first work of teaching fiction (or creative-nonfiction) "A New Kind of Christian" (2001), won Christianity Today's "Award of Merit" in 2002, becoming one a pivotal texts for "Emergence Christianity".
- Followed by "The Story We Find Ourselves In" (2003), retelling the Biblical story.
- This trilogy concluded with "The Last Word and the Word After That" (2005), reopening the question of hell and final judgment.
- "The Secret Message of Jesus" (2006), explores the kingdom of God in Jesus' teachings.
- "Everything Must Change" (2007), how the kingdom of God confronts global crises.
- "Finding Our Way Again" (2008), draws on ancient traditions to enrich spiritual formation.
- "A New Kind of Christianity" (2010), articulates ten central questions to the emergence of a postmodern, post-colonial Christian faith.
- His 2011 release, "Naked Spirituality," offers "simple, doable, and durable" practices to help people deepen their life with God.



Photographer Blair Anderson of [avisualplanet.com](http://avisualplanet.com)

- "Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? (Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World)" (2012), intersection of religious identity, inter-religious hostility, and human solidarity.
- "We Make the Road by Walking" (2014), marks a turn toward constructive and practical theology.

Brian is married to Grace, and they have four adult children and four grandchildren. His personal interests include wildlife, ecology, fishing, hiking, music, art, and literature.

## Brian McLaren October UK Tour dates

<b>Sat 8th</b>	Oasis Church Waterloo, 1 Kennington Road, London, SE1 7QP
<b>Sun 9th</b>	The Mint Methodist Centre, Fore Street, Exeter, EX4 3AT Exeter Cathedral, The Cloisters, EX1 1HS
<b>Mon 10th</b>	City United Reformed Church, Windsor Place, Cardiff, CF10 3BZ
<b>Tue 11th</b>	St. Martin's in the Bull Ring, Edgbaston Street, Birmingham, B5 5BB
<b>Wed 12th</b>	St Columba's Parish Church, Gallowgate Street, Largs, Ayrshire, KA30 8LX
<b>Thur 13th</b>	Manchester Cathedral, Victoria Street, M3 1SX
<b>Fri 14th</b>	Church of St Thomas the Martyr, Haymarket Lane, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7PF
<b>Sat 15th</b>	St Mark's Church, Leeds Road, Harrogate, HG2 8AY

The events on Monday to Friday will be in the evening. At the weekend there will be both daytime and evening events. For full tour details:

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

Tickets are now on sale and can be purchased online at the PCN Britain website:

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

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



# Review:

**When Progressives Gather Together: Liturgy, Lectionary and Landscape... and other Explorations, by Rex Hunt, Morning Star Publishing (July 2016)**

This book is steeped in Rex Hunt's years of experience of preparing and leading worship and preaching. It is both theological and practical, and is of immense value to those seeking greater understanding of what is necessary to create contemporary progressive liturgy and relevant worship resources.

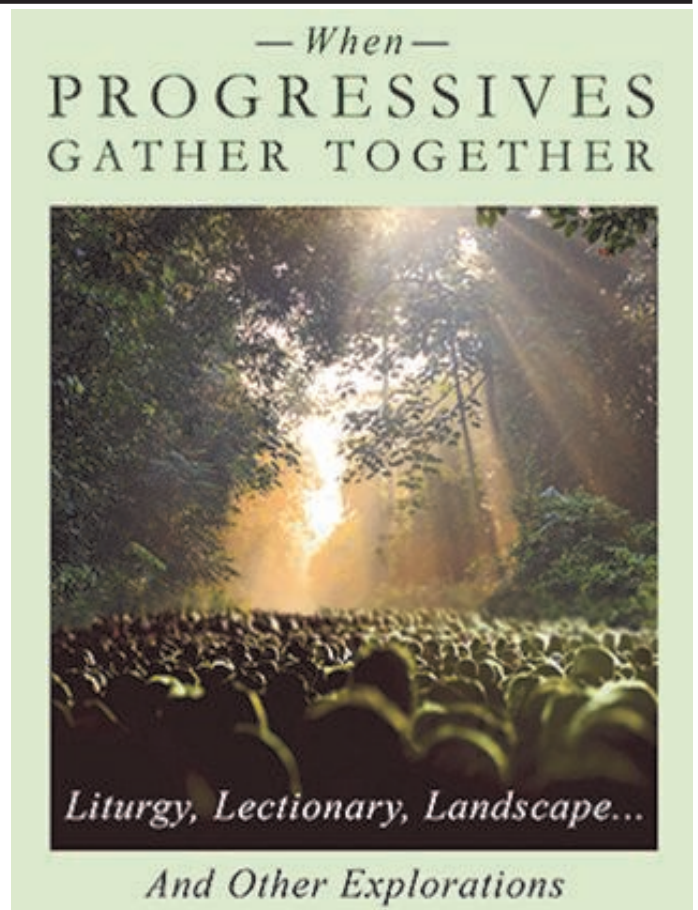
In the Introduction he states that the book itself began in the mid-1960s – as both a reviewer of the book and a user of his liturgies and sermon ideas over many years, it is obvious that he has put over 50 years of his personal creative experiences (and his lively personality!) at our disposal. All of this is set within a scholarly accessible format that avoids a heavy academic approach.

The book is divided into major sections. The first is an in-depth analysis of the effective development of progressive Christian worship. The second is a treasure trove of resources (Rex calls this a 'Toolbox') and the whole book offers a great deal of help to those who not only want to understand the principles that undergird progressive Christian worship, but also relish the opportunity to turn principles into practice. His humility comes through in a comment in the Introduction:

*I offer this collection not as an expert, because I am not, but as an explorer. Not as academic, but as practitioner. In the end I hope something of the spiritual vitality and expressiveness of progressive liturgy, combined with intellectual integrity, will be suggested. Plus some sympathetic curiosity for others to either 'keep going', or at least explore beyond the negative comments and 'road blocks' put in place by frightened church hierarchies.*

The wonderful opening chapter "It's a Story! Liturgy, Lectionary, and Landscape" explores Liturgy as story based upon biblical scholarship concerned with the 'historical' Jesus, and the fact that we are all narrative storytellers in our quest for meaning. Rex deals with gathering into space and involving the congregation in a sacramental co-operative participation and celebration. There are various practical examples and relevant resources throughout the chapter.

"Emerging from Water: Baptism in Tradition and Progressive Thought" is a thorough analysis of the history and the various theological interpretations of this sacrament, or rite of passage. It highlights that for the progressive Christian, baptism is concerned with the celebration of "the pre-existence of the sacred within the person – a child or adult. Supported by a caring and compassionate community." The liturgies and the examples are set within the elements and the landscapes of Australia but all "shaped by language that is more relationship-building than with doctrinal specificity and ecclesial distinctiveness."



Chapter 3 looks closely at Holy Communion under the title "Sometimes Hard to Swallow! Meals, Holy Communion, and the Jesus Banquet." He not only explores the different New Testament contexts in which Holy Communion / The Lord's Supper was developed but also offers some practical progressive liturgical suggestions and examples such as "The Jesus Banquet." For me, the most impressive of the sample liturgies is the "Flower Communion". Rex makes the point that the renewal of communion liturgies is a challenge not just for progressive Christians but it should be central to the revitalising of 'traditional expressions of Christianity'.

Prayer is always a challenge to those who question of whom or what the prayers are asked. Chapter 4 explores "The 'Jesus Prayer', Jesus Never Prayed! And Other Prayer Thoughts." Here he considers the social, economic and religious contexts in which Jesus may, or may not, have prayed "The Lord's Prayer". By referring to scholars, including Robert Funk, he states, *The origins of Christianity, understood as a movement among Jews, not as a new religion, lay 'in the ideas and practices of Jesus and his first followers.'* But in reality, Jesus of Nazareth contributed very little to what emerged as orthodox Christianity. Next is an interesting analysis of the Q document and the Q People, followed by a detailed look at each part of the Lord's Prayer.

"You Are The Voice! Parables, and Reimagining the Art of Preaching" looks at the extent to which modern-day preachers all too often overlook the human story. Here

he explores the role of the voice as one of several modes of communication within our religious tradition. He also challenges the telling of the Jesus story within a culture of print. Although he does touch upon electronic communication and technology, I wish that he had gone a step further and considered in more detail just how we can tell the Jesus story within the age of the internet.

Examples are given as to how we can communicate in parables and by using striking, perhaps edging on blasphemous, advertising. Consideration is given also to preaching that is shaped around ideas or experiences, and Rex gives practical examples of how his own preaching developed, and continues to develop, by use of short creative conversational cameos. One of the many high points for me was reading the following where he asks, "The goal of my preaching? I seek to enlarge the conversation by inviting others to both resonate with and to get curious – even excited about – what they hear, and to both imagine and to explore further." What better advice could there be for progressive preachers? It ends with a brief appreciation for the life and gentle ministry of Marcus Borg.

And then the book continues into its second section, the Liturgy Toolkit. There are 156 pages of liturgies written by Rex himself, along with source material, hymns, prayers and liturgies from, for example: Andrew Pratt, Shirley Erina Murray, Gretta Vosper, Kathy Galloway, Lloyd Geering, Jim Burklo, George Stuart, William L. Wallace, and so on. They cover a wide range of worship services including baptism/naming services, Christmas and other seasons, funerals and internment of ashes, the environment including "The Rite of Homecoming for Earth Children", peace issues, etc. There is consideration given to non-theistic and soft-theistic prayers; to lifestyle being more than beliefs or economics; etc.

Three pages form a thoughtful Epilogue which concludes:

*A significant paradigm change is urgently needed. It is overdue. Liturgists, worship leaders, and preachers, shaped by a progressive theology have it within them to imagine new stories, new ways to engage the human heart, new technologies that can guide our neurological development towards greater empathy... It will be an opportunity where the challenge, the hope, and the vision of creating a new language and a new sense of community is taken with radical seriousness.*

This book is a major contribution to the debate and a resource for a living, community-based, Christianity. And finally, the Combined Reference Bibliography is 14 pages – demonstrating its breadth and value. This really is a 'must buy' for all who are interested in developing and leading relevant progressive worship services.



**John Churcher** is a writer, Methodist minister, past Chair of PCN Britain, and his website is: [www.permissiontospeak.org.uk](http://www.permissiontospeak.org.uk)

# Agora

**Online Progressive magazine in Welsh: C21**

Edited by Enid R. Morgan (and team)

<http://cristnogaeth21.cymru/>

Why Agora? Because it's an open space, says the dictionary: a place of meeting in the Greek language; the scene of Paul's attempt to tell the story of Jesus in a way that might resonate in a secular context where it was possible for all and sundry to promulgate ideas and expect a fair hearing.



So it's a good word for explaining what this venture is all about, namely the creation of a digital magazine in the Welsh language that might ring bells for all those who have given up on church or chapel but still find Jesus intriguing.

Our hope, therefore, is that this site will be seen as a safe place where people can toss the questions to and fro, where they can disagree without dismissing, argue without attacking, dispute without disparaging, and definitely without wounding or anathematising anyone.

Change Agora's emphasis from the first to the second syllable, and you discover another meaning in Welsh. In Welsh, 'Agor' is the imperative 'to open'! Open the door to a rapidly changing world! Open the door to the outlook of the contemporary Welsh! Open the door to new ways of seeing - like a driver, always moving forward, but also keeping an eye on the rear view mirror to see what's going on behind us!

That's why we're launching this 'digital magazine' on the Cristnogaeth21 website in the hope that it can expand and evolve as we make the best use we can of the technical opportunities now open to us.

Aled Jones Williams in his lead article argues that today's Wales is a very different place to the myth of a hidebound conservative populace that was, anyway, far more varied and open-ended than the myth allowed for.

Freed of laying down the law, of pronouncing 'Thou shalt Nots!', or of being held back by a church order more suited to the fifteenth century, what can we contemporary Christians do to fly different kites? In short, how can the Jesus, who was crucified under the weight of religion and empire, be freed to engage with today's enquirers?

**Enid R. Morgan**

Translated by: Gethin Abraham-Williams

# Ecclesiastical Evolution?

Evolution is the struggle for survival with its processes of mutation, change, adaptation or death of species. When the natural world changes, through ice ages, earthquakes, floods, drought or mutational emergence of rival creatures, some species cannot adapt and survive the new conditions and become extinct. That struggle for survival is also present in our competitive social, commercial, political and sports worlds from which religious communities are not exempt. We have a URC commentator reporting that URC membership had declined over 40 years by a 'catastrophic' 67%. Also, the number of Roman Catholics had halved during the Archbishopric of Cardinal Hume. A former Methodist President observed that 'Whether Methodism' had to be acknowledged if the question 'Whither Methodism?' was to be faced.

Contemporary church statistics could suggest to the most cautious of prophets that in 100 years time only small pockets of Homoi Methodisticus, Reformedensis, and other related species, will be surviving in remote habitats probably being interviewed by some twenty-second century Simon Schama!

We in our old denominations do not believe we should, Dodo-like, become extinct. But can we Dodos change or adapt to survive? Posing our problem in evolutionary terms immediately suggests the question: "What are the 'environmental' changes threatening the demise of our species?" There is no doubt that in the last 2000 years there have been major changes in the intellectual environment notably since the Enlightenment.

Over fifty years ago John Robinson (J.Robinson, Honest to God p.13) observed how our 'intellectual habitat' had changed and we had already had to make one mental adaptation: "In place of a God who is physically 'up there' we have accepted as part of our mental furniture a God who is spiritually or metaphysically 'out there.'" Prof. Brian Cox has been describing the profound changes that have taken place in the way we understand our universe and ourselves, which in turn makes it increasing difficulty for many people to believe in traditional expressions of the existence of a personal Creator God who is interested in 'little me; the fallen sparrow'. The portrayal of this immeasurably vast and carelessly violent universe challenges our understanding of the very character of the Father in whom Jesus invited us to believe. Jesus was a first century man, not a space age man. If he had lived in the twenty first rather than first century would his teaching have been different?

For us to address twenty first century people as if we are living in the 'intellectual habitat' of the biblical age may invite responses between sympathy and ridicule. I still remember a very traditional baptism service when the young parents were exhorted to renounce the world, the flesh and "the devil and all his works" and we



heard a young man behind us say “This is bizarre.” It was. I don't think he would be tempted to visit us again. How many more folk will drain away from our churches as we continue to express our beliefs in first century or medieval terms?

Do we expect people to live with the mental furniture of New Testament eschatology and apocalyptic? (Derived from earlier Jewish understandings.) Do we picture the Son of Man descending from heaven in clouds of glory returning with hosts of angels to a great assize to separate the sheep from the goats and cast the wicked into the lake which burns with fire and sulphur? Apart from the non-Christian glee with which the final destruction of the wicked is portrayed (one commentator, D.L Edwards - *The Last things Now* p.56 - described Revelation as the most bitterly vindictive book in the New Testament), its three-decker concept of the universe will not survive the changes in our intellectual habitat. Most people nowadays acknowledge a quite different eschatology as they hear Prof. Brian Cox suggesting that, if in the interim a comet doesn't crash into us, then in umpteen billion years the Andromeda universe is likely to collide with ours and there is nothing out there to save us. We are no longer living in the biblical world, but in a Space age.

Recently the Anglican church negotiated an agreement with the Orthodox churches over the doctrinal split on the nature of Christ which took place at Chalcedon (AD451). It reads: “Christ has one incarnate nature that contains two natures distinguished in thought alone”. Here we are back in the intellectual habitat of the early Church which in the third century debated whether Jesus was the same substance as God (homoousios) or of similar substance to God (homoiousios), and agonized, sometimes violently, whether there was a time when Jesus ‘was not’. Picking up the ancient records of the Council of Nicea we might be forgiven for asking ‘What does all that really have to do with the life and work of the Jesus we read of in the Gospels?

The reconciliation of the two communions is good, but as one newspaper commented at the time: "Theologians are fond of characterising the original dispute as wrangle over language so recondite that in the words of one *it robs the man in the pew of not one of his forty winks during the sermon.*" Those privileged with theological training may recognise how necessary and important those debates were at the time, but may not be so aware of how irrelevant they seem now?

Those creeds are like the old castles that decorate our landscape, once necessary, fascinating for their history, worth visiting on a Bank Holiday, but not helpful in the present age in terms of the original purpose for their construction.

It is unlikely that the great mass of members of the traditional churches will easily or willingly put aside ancient doctrines. The old interpretations and pictures are very powerful and over two thousand years have inspired and sustained people who lived the Jesus life. Nevertheless, as Borg (The Heart of Christianity p.39) comments: "We cannot give our heart easily to something the mind rejects." We need to move from repeating our assensus creeds, (believing the 'right things'), to sharing a fiducia creed focusing on living the Jesus life. PCN's 'eight points', created by people both inside and outside the denominations, are an excellent contribution to this end expressing how our members wish to live as Christians, taking discipleship seriously.

Somehow we must make room in our communities for those who recognise in Jesus their hope for the world, who want to be followers of Jesus Christ, who want to belong to a Christian community sharing in its life, conversation and mission, but who do not feel at home with old habits and old theologies. To do this, we shall have to be prepared to share their experiences and their doubts, and become open to changes in ourselves and in our communities.

The Jesus mission towards human fulfilment and salvation remains. Loving one's neighbour, living out forgiveness, compassionately responding to poverty, injustice, sickness and oppression. The Jesus life does not seek power and domination over others, or privilege to advance ourselves, nor is deceived by the transitory sparkle of celebrity. These Jesus responses don't come easily in us. There is often that struggle within before we feel able to forgive, offer the other cheek, love an enemy, give what we have to the needy, protest against injustice or go the extra mile. Yet in these we are baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ by which the world may begin to be saved.



**Frank Godfrey**

is a retired Methodist Minister and member of Gloucester PCN group.

# Thoughts ...

The last edition of Progressive Voices saw a number of articles on Good Friday and Easter which set me thinking, and these are some of the resulting ideas.

It did seem to me that many of the writers take for granted the Gospel accounts of the events as being historical records, in the same way that others have tried to 'prove' the empty tomb from this evidence. This does not seem to me terribly helpful, and I would suggest a couple of alternative approaches. Firstly, we are told that the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested, so how could they have been eyewitnesses to the ensuing events? Also the Gospel accounts were written at least 40 years after the events they draw on, and so reflect a developing tradition. It seems likely that the accounts of the crucifixion, for instance, were developed from Old Testament writings such as Psalm 22, and were more of a liturgical document than a historical record.



One aspect that is often neglected is the way that 'crucifixion' has become sanitised and made respectable over the years.

Particularly in the present day, this form of execution is so removed from our experience as to be a quaint form of words that we gloss over, rather than the awful brutal reality it was at the time. Maybe if we think of Jesus as being on Death Row and going to the electric chair, this would bring home to us the dilemma of the early followers? How could someone sent to the electric chair possibly be a Son of God and worth following?

Other than the fact that Jesus was executed by the Romans, the actual details of the crucifixion are not known. Dominic Crossan hints, (Jesus - a Revolutionary biography), based on contemporary historical evidence, at the probable events by calling a chapter "The dogs at the foot of the cross". It may be hard for us to stomach, but the likely reality of this Roman punishment was that bodies were either left on the cross as a warning to other would-be opponents of Rome, or given a rudimentary burial in a shallow common grave. In either case, they could easily attract wild animals and carrion birds. The garden tomb was probably a romanticised fantasy to make the situation more respectable.

**John Ramsbottom** is one of the founder members of Manchester PCN group and is currently the local co-ordinator.



# Who was 'Jesus the man'?

In his book, "Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography", John Dominic Crossan, one of the foremost historical Jesus scholars of our time wrote: "He was an illiterate peasant but with an oral brilliance that few of those trained in literate and scribal disciplines can ever attain". (p.65) Later he writes: "He comes as yet unknown into a hamlet of Lower Galilee...he looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle". (p.218)

For us, there seems to be something appealing about the image of a poor peasant lad from a small hill-top village off the beaten track going to the Jordan to be baptised not just by water but the Holy Spirit. Then gathering together a group of equally poor, illiterate, Galileans and, within less than three years, posing a threat to an Empire which killed him and then three hundred years later the movement he started conquering that Empire. One can but wonder!

The problem is that the proposition that Jesus was an illiterate peasant somehow does not ring true even when looked at simply within the context of the Gospel narratives. Is it really credible to suggest an illiterate peasant would be taken so seriously that lawyers and scribes would travel for three days to debate with him? One can, of course, believe that his baptism was a form of divine programming by the Holy Spirit, but, to some, that does not quite make sense - even theologically. In Christian churches throughout the world we proclaim that Jesus "was made man". Jesus' humanity is fundamental to our faith. Jesus died a horrifying, demeaning and painful death on a Roman cross. His pain must have been real and it could only be real if he was truly and wholly human. So, if divine programming is 'out', how did he acquire his knowledge and skill?

If one looks at Lower Galilee where Jesus was born, brought up and spent much of his early ministry, one finds a region of fertile land and a lake rich in fish harvested by fishermen. The area was ruled by Herod Antipas, a puppet ruler of Rome who was Jewish. The inhabitants were predominantly Jewish but were poor because much of the fertile lands had fallen into the hands of rich landowners, and taxes were high. Around the lake the fishermen were also subject to high taxation. The area was relatively peaceful as Antipas was skilled in ensuring that unrest was kept to a minimum. Despite their poverty, the people were devout Jews. Every village would have had regular meetings, known as 'synagogues', for the discussion of village matters but, of much greater importance, a gathering to discuss and debate their faith. This was required by the Sh'ma Ysraeli, (Deut. 6:4-6), recited twice daily which required the Jewish people to talk of God's Great Commandment "when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up".

Periodically, an itinerant 'teacher of scripture' (rabbi)

would join the meeting and spend time with them accepting only hospitality. The evidence suggests that there were more itinerant rabbis in Galilee than in Judea, despite that fact that Jerusalem was in Judea! What little we know of Jesus' family suggests that they were also very devout, perhaps undertaking the three day walk to the Temple in Jerusalem each Passover.

Born into this environment the boy Jesus would have joined the other village boys, and have been taught the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which he would have been learned by rote. Instruction in other parts of the scriptures would have followed as he grew older. If Luke's story is factually accurate, by 12 years he could debate with his elders. He was clearly a child of exceptional ability to be able to absorb so much scripture but, of course, this is not unique. For example, Mozart was a child protégé who was competent at the keyboard and violin and composed at the age of five and in our culture we marvel at the genius of poets like Burns and John Clare. Although, in daily conversation, Jesus would have spoken Aramaic he would have also understood and spoken Hebrew. It is also likely that he could read Hebrew but perhaps not write it.

In terms of his upbringing, Jesus' father, Joseph, was, we are told, a carpenter. Some would therefore argue that, in terms of social status he was below a peasant as he had no land. But scribes and rabbis were expected to have a trade, and carpenters were regarded as particularly learned. We see this in the words of one old Jewish saying: "Is there a carpenter or the son of a carpenter who can solve this problem for us?"<sup>1</sup> One wonders therefore whether Joseph was more learned than the Gospels tell us and maybe even a minor rabbi. If this was so, we are given the image of the boy Jesus learning his trade with his father whilst at the same time discussing and debating scripture, and what the most recent itinerant rabbi had taught them.

However, would the experience and learning in a small village like Nazareth, even taking account of its close proximity to the wealthy Jewish city of Sepphoris, have been sufficient? Somehow one doubts it. If one looks at this through the eyes of a Jewish scholar, we find the view expressed that: "By the time he [Jesus] began his public ministry he had not only received the thorough religious training typical of the average Jewish man of his day but also he had probably spent years studying with one of the outstanding rabbis in Galilee."<sup>2</sup>

This presents us with a problem in terms of the Gospel narratives as there is no mention of Jesus having a "teacher" unlike, for example, Paul. Indeed, in Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus telling his disciples: "The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master", (Matt.10:24 and Luke 6:40). While there may be debate as to whether Jesus actually said these words, they are indicative of the narrative that

Matthew and the other Gospels writers were telling. The focus is on Jesus as the central character and all other supporting characters are very much 'bit parts' and that focus would have become blurred by any suggestions that Jesus was the son of a rabbi and had also been taught by a rabbi of the school of Hillel the Elder or that of his rival Shammai.

In addition to the uncertainty of his religious training, there are other potential problems with Jesus' early life. Luke tells us that he was about thirty years old when "he began his work". This is the age at which, in Jewish eyes at the time, a man reached full maturity. It was also the age at which David became king, (2 Sam 5:6). The Gospels then tell us of a hectic period of perhaps one to three years when his reputation as a miracle worker and teacher spread across the region beyond Galilee to Decapolis and into Judea, to Jerusalem itself; to such an extent that he posed a threat to the stability of the government. Is this really credible in a time when there was no mass communication as we know it? Is it not more feasible that Jesus had already been gaining a reputation in Galilee before his baptism? This suggestion may seem to conflict with the Gospels which tell us that his own home town rejected him at the start of his ministry. But that story has its own problems. Nazareth was a small village, and one would have assumed that many would have recognised his abilities and noticed his developing controversial views in the discussions in the local synagogue. This could seem to suggest that he had spent much of his early adult life away from Nazareth as the disciple of an itinerant rabbi or studying in another location. This possibility gains some weight from the fact that Jesus does not appear to have married. To the Jews marriage and the raising of children were important because of their belief that God blessed Noah and his sons, and commanded them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." (Gen. 9:1) It would have been unusual for a man of Jesus' age not to have been married – something which has caused no end of speculation. Looking at this in the context of Jesus' world, it was not uncommon for an itinerant rabbi and his disciples to be unmarried as the lifestyle of being constantly on the move and relying on local hospitality was not conducive to family life. Rabbis tended to marry later in life in their thirties and forties. Unless they were like Shim'on ben Azzai who towards the end of the 1st century said: "What should I do? I am enamoured with the Torah. Others can enable the world to continue to exist"

Looking again for clues within the Gospels, one finds that the town of Capernaum on the coast of the Sea of Galilee had a prominent place in Jesus' ministry and this leads one to speculate that he may have spent more time there than we are told. Capernaum was a thriving place on two major caravan routes and, from archaeological research, had a synagogue building in the 1st century. Was it perhaps in Capernaum that Jesus



spent time studying with the local rabbis as well as the itinerant rabbis passing through the town? Was it there in the synagogue that he first met with Peter, Andrew, James, John and even Levi, the tax collector, and listened to and debated with them, identifying them as potential disciples when he began his ministry? Was it here that he had his house and home? (Mark 2:1; 9:33). Had he, before he commenced his ministry, perhaps visited the neighbouring villages to prepare the ground for when he decided, following his baptism and a period of meditation in the wilderness, to begin the great task that was entrusted to him by God.

There will be many who might find this image of Jesus as a traditional, but exceptionally able Jewish rabbi, uncomfortable. Regrettably many Christians, including scholars, have been anxious over the centuries to ignore his firm Jewish roots. In many ways it is easier for some just to see Jesus as a miracle-worker and mystic. But we have tended to ignore that in the times he lived he was not the only one who fitted that description, and that there were others recorded by writers in that period. Jesus was different and, if we are to really understand why, we need to have open minds exploring him as a man of exceptional intellectual ability steeped in the traditions of his people, but who, by his work, revealed the 'one God' to millions of people and to remember what one leading Jewish scholar tells us that:

*I cannot honestly find a single word of Jesus that could seriously exasperate a well intentioned Jew.*

David Flusser (1917-2000)

(Orthodox Jew & Hebrew University of Jerusalem professor.)

<sup>1</sup> (David Flusser, Steven Notley; The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius (2007) William B Eerdmans p.14)

<sup>2</sup> (David Bivin; New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus (2007) Engedi Resource Centre, Holland MI USA p.9)



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

# News from local groups

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

Newcomers are always welcome.

## Bolton

Jim Hollyman

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When every member of our growing group attends we are almost too many for our host's room, which is an encouraging sign.

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

## Chelmsford

Jane Anderson

01245 466160 jane.anderson@pcnbritain.org.uk

The 5-8 of us meet on the 2nd Sunday of each month at St Augustine's Church, North Springfield. We begin at 6.15pm with coffee, at 6.30pm we watch our chosen DVD and then discuss the theme together. We are currently watching 'Saving Jesus'.

## Edinburgh

Mary McMahon

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After our March meeting, when we focussed on 'Appreciating Marcus Borg', we had a change of gear in April and together tackled the difficult issue about our hopes for the future of PCN here, with some

concern being expressed about the difficulty of making ourselves known to others on the margins - or within - the church who want to explore the kind of issues we grapple with. On May 30th we are going to a local hotel for a dinner to celebrate the 10th anniversary of PCN in Edinburgh. We launched as PCN Scotland on May 6th 2006, and became PCN Edinburgh when the second Scottish group in Dundee began, to be followed by others in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and most recently Stirling. Many of us expressed at the April meeting what membership of the group continues to mean to us.

## Exeter

Liz Vizard

01392 668859 liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk

We were delighted to welcome Adrian Alker on April 10th to speak to us about his new book. His talk was extremely well received and discussion was lively. Adrian and Christine, and Adrian's mother Nellie, were able to meet up with an old friend and then went on to Truro and Tavistock.

We have staffed a PCN stall in the Churches' area at the Devon County Show on 19th-21st May and thanks to PCN members visiting the show for giving us some moral support! On October 9th our friends in Truro have organised a SW event at the Mint Methodist Church in Exeter as part of the Brian McLaren tour. Details are on the events section of the PCN website and elsewhere in this newsletter. Booking early is advised as numbers are limited. We will be hoping to hold one or two meetings a year with high profile speakers from now on. There is one small group meeting monthly in Exeter and another is being planned. Please contact Liz if you would like to be involved in such a group, or to host one in the Exeter area. The small groups are responsible for organising themselves, but we can help with our large mailing list.

## Hertfordshire Diana Reddaway

01707 330570 diana.reddaway@pcnbritain.org.uk

Numbers attending are usually around 10. We meet on the 3rd Sunday of each month (4-5pm) to continue our discussions of the work of Borg and Crossan. The afternoons finish with light refreshments and informal chats. Please note that as from September's meeting we will be switching to the 4th Sunday of each month. For details of how to find the venue please contact Diana.

## Leeds

Sandra Griffiths

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We meet at Chapel Allerton Methodist (Church) Centre, Town Street, Leeds LS7 4NB monthly on a Saturday between 10.30am and 12, with coffee/tea and our mini-library available from 10.00am.

Since the start of 2016 our meetings have had a variety of topics: desert experiences, reading and writing icons, and the short film 'Beyond Forgiving' which we think all church groups would benefit from watching and discussing. We had a visit from John Churcher - speaking on "21st century developments: are we still 'Creating God in our own Image'?" In June we had a session on Theological/religious doubt – is it a strength or a weakness? Future 2016 Saturday meetings: 9 July, 10 Sept, 8 Oct, 12 Nov, 10 Dec. And we are hoping to host a day conference in Leeds in 2017 on a date to be decided, with John Churcher as our speaker. Suggestions for topics and/or leaders are always welcome.

## Manchester John Ramsbottom

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Our meetings this year have been based on a chosen theme "exploring what I believe" and various members have given their individual take on what they feel to be important. This has ranged from discussion of whether we can see God as interventionist, to whether

how we act is actually more important than what we say. To give a bit of variety for 2 of the months, we hired a DVD from the PCN library – Gretta Vosper's "With or without God". She is quite controversial, being currently threatened with expulsion from her church for heresy. The film created quite a lot of interest and left a number of us puzzled as to what to make of it. We have continued to use the Borg book "Speaking Christian" and have covered the chapter on Sin, with a coming evening looking at Jesus as "the only way".

The final meeting for this session will be in June when we will plan ahead for the autumn. Please come along with your ideas and suggestions. There are already two items arranged, as in Oct we will host one of the Brian McLaren tour events in Manchester Cathedral, and in Nov have invited Adrian Alker to speak about his book.

We continue to attract upwards of a dozen people for each meeting – and we have room for more!

### Market Harborough Jill Cooper

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Our occasional meetings on a Sunday evening take place every 5 or 6 weeks, when we bring together for discussion our thoughts on a subject agreed at the previous meeting, often including poetry, articles and books which have helped or informed our thinking. Recent topics have included the vulnerability of the God of Love (the inevitability of love leading to pain as well as joy), and how we personally experience the Resurrection. On 19th June we shall address the challenge of living as a Christian here and now. We are supporting the Oadby group in staging another half-day conference on October 22nd to be led by Adrian Alker, based on his new book 'Is A Radical Church Possible?' We hope to see some of you there!

### Newbury

01635 47196

Maria Grace

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With growth in numbers (we are about 12 now) we have outgrown

meeting in our homes and now meet at Newbury Quaker Meeting house. It also means we can stop discussing dates! The last Friday morning of each month is when we meet. At the moment we are delving into Marcus Borg's book 'Speaking Christian' chapter by chapter and finding it generates some good discussion.

### Newcastle

01670 51980

Pat Fuller

pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk

Recently we have had five people join the group. While this is a delight it creates the challenge of how to welcome those who are putting their toe into progressive Christian thinking within a group where some members have been on the journey for several years. We plan a monthly programme a few months in advance which means newcomers are sometimes thrown in at the deep end. I wonder how other groups cope with the success of getting bigger? With guests like Rex Hunt last Sept, Adrian Alker, in May (which led to a stimulating afternoon's discussion) and the planned visit by Brian McLaren in Oct, more people are beginning to hear about us. We already attract people from several denominations and from a wide area. Perhaps we may have to split into new groups? In June Joyce Firth, Methodist preacher and long-standing member of PCN, is going to lead us into a discussion about parables of the New Testament. In July we are holding an evening in a member's home with the title 'Sharing Wisdom, Wine and Words'.

### Richmond

0208 878 7355

Alan Powell

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The group have been holding a series of meetings based on Dave Tomlinson's "Re-enchanting Christianity" and found the book both refreshing and challenging. Two final meetings will follow a summer break. The future

dates have yet to be decided, but will be posted on the website.

### St Albans

01727 760058

John Churcher

john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk

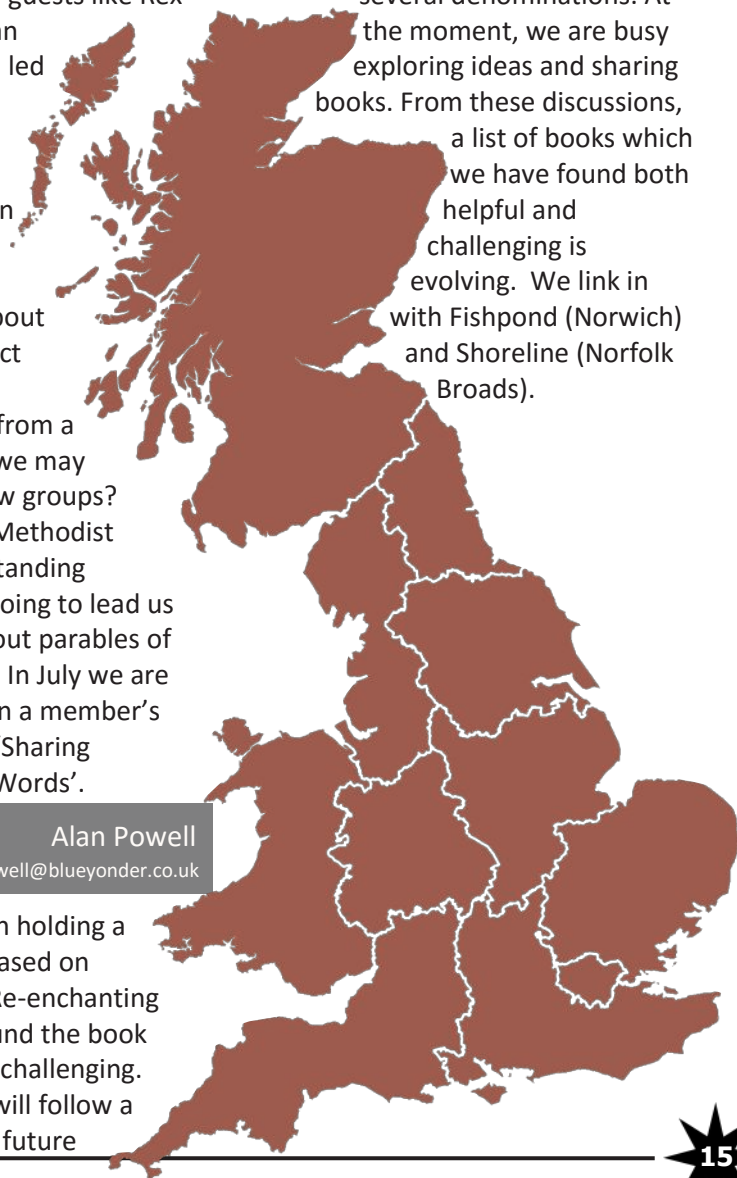
Having completed the studies in Roger Ray's book "Progressive Faith and Practice" we are currently calling upon the expertise and interests of group members to introduce the topics for discussion. Numbers vary between 12 and 25 depending upon other events on the 4th Thursday evening of each month! Meetings commence at 7.30pm although light refreshments are served from around 7.15pm. The venue continues to be Trinity URC, 100 yards from the mainline station.

### Shellseekers (N. Norfolk) Diana Cooke

01263 740320

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We began meeting last July and have continued to do so, about every six weeks, usually on a Friday morning. Between us, we represent several denominations. At the moment, we are busy exploring ideas and sharing books. From these discussions, a list of books which we have found both helpful and challenging is evolving. We link in with Fishpond (Norwich) and Shoreline (Norfolk Broads).





**Shoreline** (Norfolk Broads) Julia Morris  
01692 598538 julia.morris@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are a core group of seven people. We meet every Thursday at 2.00 p.m. in a member's house. Between us we attend various Churches and none. We are currently using the Bart Ehrmann set of DVD's entitled "How Jesus became God" – from the PCN Britain Library. Along with this, our discussions are provoked and inspired by, local and national events and the Church press. Since we believe we must take action on peace and justice issues, as well as talk about them, we collect for WaterAid, support a local homeless charity at Christmas and organise, all through the year, the collection and delivery of goods, from four villages, for the Norwich Foodbank – where the need continues to grow. We join in with Fishpond Meetings in Norwich on the last Friday of the month when we can. We take time to share and support one another through life's joys and challenges. We relish the freedom to share, question, disagree, learn and laugh together.

**N Worcestershire** Tessa Carrick  
01527 873135 tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk

At our April meeting there were about a dozen present to consider prayer, meditation and reflection. The afternoon was ably led and we focused on personal approaches. Unusually we were challenged to try out one of the suggestions there and then. We were given a passage from the Gospels to reflect on, and to write down our thoughts as if we were one of the participants in the story. For some of us this was not a new approach but it led to some interesting sharing of reactions. There is still more to explore on the topic, especially on the leadership of prayer during public worship. The

supportive nature of the group makes it possible for everyone to contribute to our discussions. Our next meeting will be on Tuesday 12th July at 2.30 pm in the home of two of our members in Stourbridge. We will be looking at Jan Berry's 'Rethinking Worship' in the Together in Hope Series of booklets.

**Cristnogaeth21**  
[www.cristnogaeth21.cymru](http://www.cristnogaeth21.cymru)

### (Christianity21 in Welsh)

Wales has an ancient history of faith-expression through our native language pre-dating the arrival of Anglo-Saxons onto these islands. It appears that the appetite for such expression has not diminished. The shocking rate of decline of our previously influential denominations during the 20th century and the closure of chapels up and down the country, has left our landscape dotted with large empty shells. Nevertheless, there remains an interest in the sharing of ideas in Welsh, to equip our faith community to face the future. Because of the sparsity of Wales' population, and the growing potential for using a technology, it was decided about a decade ago that C21 would start its life as an experimental online community. From the outset the founders expressed the belief that we should be able to discuss faith without expecting uniformity and that we should give voice to a variety of

theological positions in order to enrich Christian thinking in Welsh. The group set out to produce and disseminate articles and discussion pointers of interest to progressive Christians and enquirers. From the original discussion and articles forum (now having reached up to 5000 hits for some of the items posted), C21 has subsequently developed a Facebook presence with just under 200 regular readers. It has also supported the publishing of progressive books and more recently a new website, hosting a range of facilities including a new progressive online magazine, AGORA (see page 9). Additionally, all subscribers receive a weekly email that is a progressive "thought for the week." Because of the level of interest generated, C21 has organized national conferences, with the next being held on June 11th in Aberystwyth, along with weekend retreats. Speakers have been invited from the community of theologians and poets, authors, dramatists and social commentators – from Wales and beyond. It is an ever-evolving community. Where next for C21 is unknown, but we hope to continue to provide a platform for progressive dialogue and challenge, meeting the needs of those who wish to express matters of faith in Welsh. In 2016, C21 became affiliated to PCN Britain, and on 23rd October will host Bishop Jack Spong in Cardiff.



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# Gift from the Sea

Whilst I was on retreat last autumn I was describing to my group the ongoing tensions of my life as a mother, wife and employee. I expressed a strong desire for peace, simplicity and solitude, yet I was simultaneously dealing with the seemingly relentless demands of family life. Demands which sometimes felt as if they drew me in many different directions.

An older woman in the group told me I should read 'Gift from the Sea' by Anne Morrow Lindbergh. I was somewhat sceptical; it's a book written over seventy years ago, would this have anything to say to the dilemmas of a working mother in the 21st century?

It's a small book of just 150 pages, and I have now read it at least three times since I received it. The book is a selection of meditations which spring from a holiday retreat the author takes at a cabin on a beach. Each chapter reflects on a shell she finds on the beach and inspires her to consider the different stages of a woman's life and spiritual development.

The relevance of her writing to modern life is perhaps the book's most striking feature. I've always thought that much of the distraction and fragmentation that I feel is due to the current emphasis on activity in middle class family life, combining in a fairly toxic way with the downsides of the internet's endless information, endless choice, endless distractions. Life becomes chaotic and fragmented. How can I find my centre amongst this?

First published in 1955 to me she speaks directly to this dilemma, describing how women's capacity to love and to be drawn in different directions, often towards the needs of others, is something which makes it challenging to find a sense of inner wholeness. A key issue is that the work we do in making family life come together is still undervalued and under-rewarded by society. However, perhaps more significant is the fact that if women want to be creative we have to find a way to address the fragmentation of our lives so we can seek a deeper self-knowledge and self-expression. We need to see ourselves as more than a collection different functions. For Lindbergh giving ourselves permission to find time in each day where we can be alone is essential to this:

*'Women need solitude in order to find again the true essence of themselves.'*

Interestingly she notes that whilst we need to be hugely grateful for the way technology is helping us with household chores, some of the more traditional chores such as bread-kneading and sewing, might have been more conducive to contemplation than chauffeuring people around and answering the phone. I sense that responding to email might have an even greater negative potential for disturbing our inner peace!

As someone approaching forty five I was very intrigued by her thoughts on midlife. She describes the transitions within marriage, and the pain/beauty of the ebb and

flow of life. She acknowledges that we will probably resist the transition to midlife as it brings loss of newness, restlessness and frustrations, very much like the pain of adolescence. Yet whilst we accept these 'growing pains' in adolescence we are less tolerant of these symptoms of the transition to

midlife. Lindbergh says we must not run away from these 'life signs' as they are indicators that we are moving to 'a new stage of living, when, having shed many of the physical struggles, the worldly ambitions, the material encumbrances of active life, one might be free to fulfil the neglected side of one's self. One might be free for growth in mind, heart and talent, free at last for spiritual growth...'

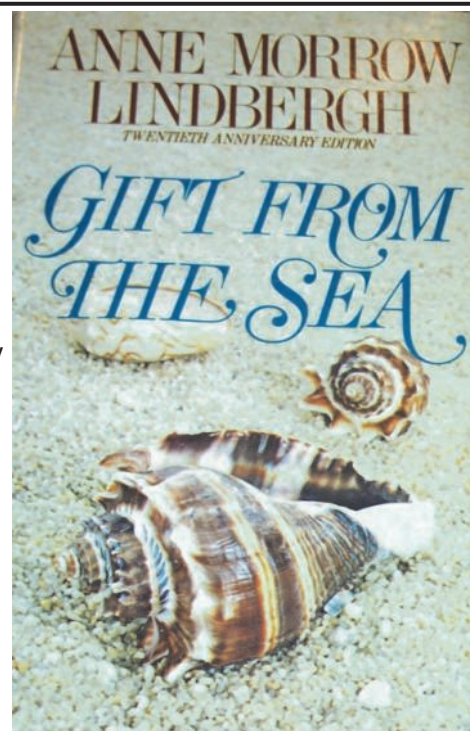
At the end of the day we must learn to stand alone and find our true centre, so we might be, as Rilke describes a 'world to oneself for another's sake'.

It's an encouraging image, although she doesn't shirk from acknowledging the pain involved. She wrote the book while her five children still lived at home, and in her afterward, written 20 years later, she acknowledges that at this point she was in no way prepared for the loss and sense of purposelessness that her children leaving home, ('the empty shell'), would bring.

Overall her vision of solitude and standing alone is not bleak or lonely, it is positive and reassuring.

*'Every day, every act, is an island, washed by time and space, and has an island's completion. People, too, become like islands in such an atmosphere, self-contained, whole and serene; respecting other people's solitude, not intruding on their shores, standing back in reverence before the miracle of another individual. "No man is an island," said John Donne. I feel we are all islands – in a common sea.'*

I love this vision, and for me the support and insight that a woman writing 70 years ago can bring to my present experience is all part of the 'common sea' that connects and sustains us.



# Portraying God

A small boy, whose teacher asked him what he was painting, replied, "God." "Nobody knows what God looks like," said the teacher. "They will, when I'm finished," the boy responded earnestly. Many who chuckle at that tale just as earnestly present their picture of God and think they've captured the divine essence. They tell us God's thoughts, future plans, and the process of salvation for each individual. Reducing an infinite God who forms and sustains a world teeming with a huge variety of creatures, including billions of humans with unique personalities, diverse skills and a vast range of life experiences, set in an immense universe, down to a size and character they can comprehend and who thinks like they do. They've forgotten "My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts", and Augustine's warning – "If you understand, it isn't God." There's meant to be mystery – "I am what I am; I will be whatever I will be." Those who think they have all the answers haven't found half the questions! The God they define so closely is too small and often too exclusive.

*"It is all revealed to us in Scripture."* Certainly; but in the Bible we see a developing understanding from Abraham's mountain-top God, and Moses' jealous tribal God who participated in battles and demanded strict adherence to rules. Prophets brought new insights: Amos' God preferred justice to sacrifices; the love of Hosea's God is too strong to ever to give up on the people. We have the Father God Jesus taught to his disciples, while in Revelation we find a God of reward and punishment and renewal. We form our personal biblical picture by selecting from this array. We read scripture through the lenses of what we've been taught, personal experience, and the insights God gives us. Some pre-scientific images in the Bible present a God who's difficult for many in the 21st century to accept.

*"Jesus is the perfect revelation of God."* Indeed - but which Jesus? The Jesus surrendering himself to death on the cross to bring freedom, or the one returning in glory to impose his will onto the world? The Jesus refusing to condemn the adulteress, or the one judging the whole of humanity? The homeless preacher sweating blood in Gethsemane, or the Son of God enthroned in heaven? The Jesus challenging you to action or the one in whose arms you rest when things get tough? The Jesus reaching out to sinners and the 'unclean' on the margins of society, or the one condemning those without the right beliefs? (A Jesus who is beyond time and space may be all of these at the same time, but we tend to focus on the image we like or the one we need at the time.) Jesus himself was far more concerned with faith expressed in relationships and in action than with definitions, with commitment and compassion rather than catechisms.

*"But I know it's true from my own experience."*

Absolutely. We can be certain, because true faith lies not in doctrines or descriptions but in the transforming

wordless experience of love and trust, of commitment and faithfulness that comes from our personal encounter with God. "The truth that will set you free" isn't a series of statements about God and salvation, but the knowledge of God's love and creative power you feel from the centre of your being. Differing gifts and experiences mean that each relationship with God is unique. If we're to help and encourage one another, we must celebrate difference and honour each other's faith. Our freedom to be different, to create and to choose enables us to enter genuine loving relationships. It's what makes us human. If we were designed to love, praise and serve God without free will, we'd be robots - soulless sycophants, pandering to God's egotism.

Though the boy in my story is confident in his portrayal of God, he wouldn't be fazed if other children produced different pictures of God. Children cope happily with that; it's adults who want to impose their perceptions onto others. We lack children's openness, and their sense of wonder, and so we see "a dim reflection in a mirror". Perhaps that's why we're told to be like children in our approach to God - they trust without expecting to have all the answers, and they happily amend their ideas as they broaden their understanding. Then we might see faith as a journey of exploration into God rather than a set of beliefs, as an adventure and a challenge rather than a refuge from harm or a ticket into heaven, as freedom from our past and freedom to become the people we are called to be. If we are to encourage people to embrace that freedom and develop their own relationship with God, we must open up opportunities for them that suit their gifts and temperaments.

If we have too fixed an idea of God we won't recognize God's presence in the unexpected. If our image is the King of Kings, we may not recognize him in a gardener, in someone who joins us on a journey, or a stranger on the shore. If we define God too closely, we may create barriers for others, restrict their potential and make it difficult for our children and grandchildren to recognize God in situations they'll face in an unknown future.

Jesus didn't say, "Learn these facts about God"; he declared, "Follow me." The disciples did follow – with all their doubts and questions, and their struggling to understand. That's what we're called to do – to follow Jesus, not merely "believe in him," not merely "accept him," not merely "worship him," but follow him. Follow him through our doubts and questions and struggles to understand. Follow him into an unfamiliar future.

Following implies that we're not yet where we need to be. We must keep developing our faith - ask questions, share experiences, learn from one another; and encourage and care for each other. As we reflect him in our lives more and more, so we will gain greater insights into his nature and into God's love.

**Philip Sudworth**

# Patient Choice ..... ?

Assisted suicide, like abortion, produces very strong views on either side of the arguments. I will not rehearse the various standard arguments, but rather I would like to share my own experiences both in life generally and while working in hospices.

Any such review must start with considering suicide in general. Firstly I acknowledge that I myself have had suicidal feelings at certain times in my life. During in-depth courses which I ran on facing death for some 400 GPs and medical students, it emerged that around half of us have had similar feelings but rarely admit to them. It is not 'they' but 'we' who make choices.

Secondly, many years ago I had a girlfriend who suffered from severe manic-depression (Bipolar Disorder in modern terms). When she was depressed her level of pain was truly terrible to witness, in spite of her receiving all manner of psychiatric support. Her eventual suicide was, I believe, inevitable. I deeply regret being unable to be with her as she was dying but she knew that my presence would be a crime.

I have worked with Samaritans. Their aim is to reduce suicide levels but they accept an individual's right to make a choice of suicide. Sometimes we simply stay on the phone to be 'alongside' someone who is slowly sinking into unconsciousness after, for example, taking an 'overdose'. What we do offer is to listen to their distress without judging their feelings or the outcome of the conversation: that alone enables them to talk more freely about this taboo act. That role does not conflict with our joy when someone who has taken an overdose decides, after receiving our support, to call an ambulance for help. I suggest that 'allowing' anyone in distress to talk about suicide, whether they have terminal illness or not, is an opening to talk about deepest fears. Such a conversation is meaningless unless there is a genuine possibility of suicide (as for callers to Samaritans with guaranteed confidentiality.)

One of my earlier hospice experiences was to receive news that a patient had died when his condition a few days earlier had seemed very stable. I raised the question of whether he might have taken an overdose of his prescribed morphine. There was a brief nod followed by a gesture 'we don't talk about that'. We have no idea how often this happens. I suggest it does matter because such people are probably left to die on their own without being able to share (openly) their last hours/minutes. (Anyone not reporting such an event is open to the criminal charge of aiding and abetting suicide.) It matters so we can be alongside people nearing death – whether self-imposed or otherwise.

But the greatest argument, in my view, for changing the law is that euthanasia (without patient consent) does happen, and not infrequently. There have been several surveys (which have to be anonymous to prevent

charges being brought) which all show that many doctors (particularly GPs) do expedite death as their primary aim of medications

when they consider it humane. (See John Griffiths, et al, *Euthanasia and Law in Europe*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2008, page 367, 491.) It happened to a beloved aunt of mine. I think she would have welcomed it but, because it was illegal, I could not be informed and therefore missed being present with her in her last hours.

In the confidential surroundings of my Facing Death workshops, I asked GPs about their responses if someone asked for help to die sooner. The response shocked me, namely that the doctors were less likely to 'oblige' because the matter had been raised openly and therefore they would be more likely to be investigated, face criminal charges and lose their medical registration. I am sure their motivation is compassionate but, without asking the patient calmly and over a period of time, it is the doctor's judgement and their own life experience which determines the outcome of death rather than the conscious and considered choice of the patient. So in my view there is a strong argument to put safeguards and controls on what now happens in a totally unregulated and paternalistic way.

Finally, how important is patient choice? Most of us have no problem with a person's right to decline treatment even if it has a high chance of extending their life. But there are less clear instances. Brain tumours are often sensitive to changing doses of steroids. Late in the course of such tumours, very high doses can often give extra time (for example a few weeks) but will never 'cure'. I regularly offered this to such patients. But I had a man with such a tumour who had already said that if he could not be cured, he would want to die ASAP. Was I right to offer him this option realising that he would spot, by implication, that if he stopped his modest dose of steroids, he would die more quickly? I offered and he immediately stopped his steroids and died rapidly within three days. Was I, by indirectly informing him of a way to commit suicide, aiding and abetting it? Should we be limiting a person's right to choose, especially at such a critical time as dying?



Photo courtesy <http://philip.greenspun.com>

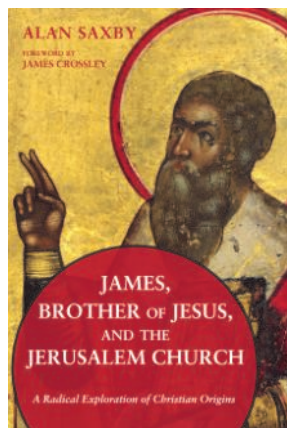


**Hugh McMichael** is a member of the Malvern PCN group, was a hospice doctor, humanistic psychologist, and finds humanism and Christianity compatible.

# Reviews

## James, Brother of Jesus, and the Jerusalem Church

by Alan Saxby, WIPF and Stock



Alan Saxby is a retired Methodist minister, who became fascinated by aspects of the story of the early church. He pursued his investigation through a doctorate

which forms the basis of this, his first book. It is substantial and academic, meticulously researched, cogently presented and fully referenced with footnotes. This is a writer full of intellectual curiosity and very readable. Alan Saxby introduces us to James, who is named as the 'brother' of Jesus by early Christian tradition. He is presented here as the alleged leader of a group known as 'the poor', active in Jerusalem, contemporary with, but separate from, Jesus' ministry in Galilee. The book pursues James' identity, the context in which he lived and worked and his, and his group's, interaction with John the Baptist.

There are tantalizing possibilities of links with the Gospel stories. Is James the elder brother in Jesus' telling of the story of the prodigal son? Is James' group 'the poor in spirit' blessed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? What is the relationship between this group focused on John the Baptist and his prophecies, and the early church understanding of the meaning of the life, teaching and death of Jesus?

Alan Saxby describes his research quest as having the flavour of a detective novel and this is indeed how the book reads. The mix of detailed and painstaking research, and the search for understanding of the complexities of life and teaching in the very early church never ceases, page by page, to hold the reader's attention.

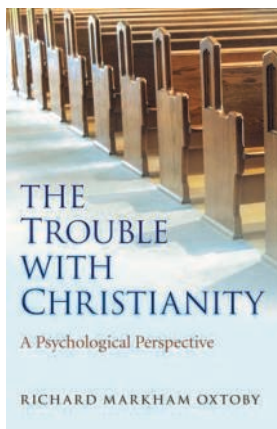
For the reader with an interest in the origins of Christianity who has an open approach to viewing its birth and growth, this is a book which will reward and enlighten.

Christine King

## The Trouble with Christianity:

A Psychological Perspective by Richard Markham Oxtoby, Christian Alternative

I've never been brought up so short by the beginning of a book (extraordinarily



hard-hitting and thought-provoking), but after that I'm afraid it all went downhill.

After a highly technical chapter on the workings of nerve and brain cells, which is not

obviously connected to the rest of the book, the author develops the argument that there are two types of Christianity: one humanistic, typified by such virtues as openness, compassion, with a non-dogmatic approach; the other authoritarian, the exact opposite. When dealing with the authoritarian variety, words like psychopathology abound and the author links this unabashedly to atonement theory and other notions such as God as a policeman in the sky. The usual villains are lined up for attack (the conservative right) and the usual issues (abortion, contraception, gay rights) are wheeled out to show that only humanistic Christians are capable of holding the right opinion on such matters.

If that sounds simplistic, I'm afraid that's pretty much the way the argument goes. The dangers of this approach are illustrated by his comments on euthanasia; he fails to notice, or doesn't know, that euthanasia has been opposed by the disabled community and not just the part of that community with religious views. I found myself asking questions like where writers like Marilyn Robinson, Sara Maitland and others like Johnny Cash and Nadia Bolz-Webber fit on this all or nothing scale?

There were some genuinely interesting points, and I share his positive reaction to certain liberating developments in the church and also his revulsion at the sort of Christianity which does not feel able to say how great they think God is without rushing to add they themselves are scrofulous curs not fit even to be

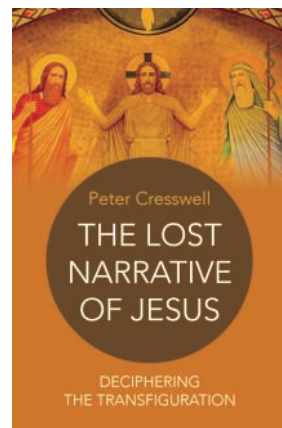
admitted to the grubbiest abandoned dogs home. However it bears all the hallmarks of having been shaped too much by the American culture wars and effectively treats conservatives the same way the author claims they treat liberals. I feel his all or nothing approach is simply not true to many people's experience of faith.

Guy Whitehouse

## The Lost Narrative of Jesus: deciphering the transfiguration, by Peter Cresswell, Christian Alternative

NT scholars face a daunting task. With no accounts written during Jesus' life, no original surviving documents, a few fragments of text some 200 years after the events

and more complete copies from 100 years after that – all copied and amended by partial editors many times over – what hope of distinguishing history from the muddle? At least we can admire the scholars for their persistence as fresh studies continue to appear.



This book examines two puzzles: the abrupt ending to Mark's gospel and the position in chapter 9 of the story of the Transfiguration. Is there any connection between these two? A convincing case is made that the Transfiguration story does not fit in its context. Instead he proposes that this story fits in better as an ending to the gospel. Was this another post-resurrection appearance of Jesus? It bears mysterious features that might suggest it is. If so, is it the missing ending of the earliest (and lost) version of Mark's gospel? Why was it "folded" into chapter 9 before Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources? (They both firmly place this story during Jesus' ministry.)

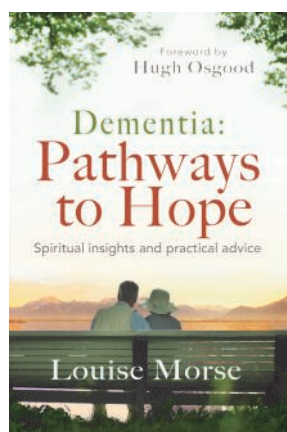
The author rejects the idea that the Transfiguration is a post-resurrection appearance. On the contrary he argues that this was an historic event that occurred, probably on Mount Hermon, after the crucifixion when Jesus and some disciples returned to Galilee. To support this hypothesis he makes a

plausible case for Jesus being taken down from the cross alive. After recovering in a safe house from his ill-treatment and wounds, he with Peter and Andrew return to Galilee just as the young man in the tomb tells those looking for the body. The Mount Hermon meeting with two strangers was to arrange for an outlawed Jesus to escape to safety in Syria. The case for this hypothesis is well argued, but corroborating evidence is inevitably scarce. Although there is a deal of repetition throughout the book, it is intriguing and eminently readable.

**Robin Story**

**Dementia: Pathways to Hope**  
by Louise Morse, Monarch Books

This is a well thought out book, full of anecdotal evidence which carers can



relate to, whilst it enlightens first time readers about dementia. Throughout you can feel the passion that Louise has for her subject - both

spiritually and as someone with empathy with those who have dementia and the people who care for them.

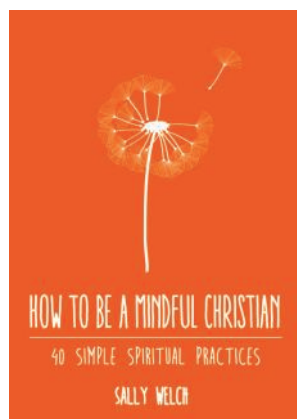
She is not afraid to tackle issues from which others tend to shy away. She confronts 'indifference to older people', describes incidents of bad practice, ageism and assisted suicide, and makes you sit up and take notice.

She gives examples of how we all, including Church families, can and have come together and become 'dementia embracing'. Louise provides the information and motivation to want to do this. Her book, her words, give encouragement and a 'Pathway to Hope' not only to the people with dementia and those who care for them, but for those in the wider community. There is much more our churches could do to improve the lives, not only of those with dementia, but for all that live in despair and feel that they no longer matter. Ephesians 6:10 talks about 'building up strength by union with God and then using the power given.' Its time for us all to stand up and be counted!

**Lorna Bowling**

**How To Be A Mindful Christian**  
by Sally Welch, Canterbury Press

The book begins with a clear, concise introduction to the practice of mindfulness, explaining how it brings moment by moment awareness to our



daily lives, helping us to see the world just as it is, without judgement. Sally explains how to recognise stress and anxiety and to use our

breath to create space and time to choose the most appropriate way to solve problems. She suggests that the space mindfulness gives us, enables us to encounter God in our environment and in every living creature, and she explains mindful prayer and meditation.

We are given forty days' worth of exercises and reflections to explore, using our senses. Each begins with a Bible text, followed by explanation points for discussion and finally, an exercise using mindfulness skills. Each one is designed to bring us closer to God in every moment of our daily lives.

She offers mindful exercises for Holy Week, giving the opportunity to enter more deeply into the Passion that lies at the heart of our faith. "The Mindful Pilgrimage" explores pilgrimage elements: travelling light, encountering obstacles, sharing with strangers, and rest and restoration. Historically, pilgrims travelled to a specific holy place to find God, but God is everywhere, so pilgrimage can become a metaphor for the journey of Christian living.

The book is easy to read and to understand, and for me it served the dual purpose of mindful practice and daily Bible study. Sally's interpretations of Bible passages and links to mindful practice use everyday human examples that we can all relate to, making this material accessible to all. It is a book that I will use often. It really is an "inviting and practical guide that brings together the popular practice of mindfulness and the Christian spiritual disciplines of prayer and contemplation."

A most enjoyable book!

**Christine Holmes**

**Christianity in a Nutshell**  
by Leonardo Boff, Orbis Books

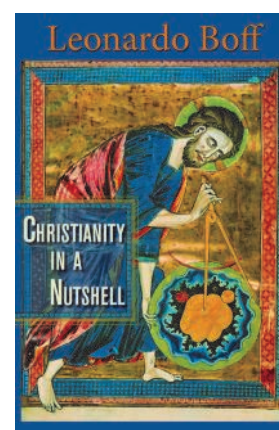
**Christianity: An Explorer's Guide**  
by Marcus Braybrooke,  
Braybrooke Press

**Christianity: A Very Short Introduction**  
by Linda Woodhead, Oxford University Press

**In the Context of Eternity**  
by David Arnold, Grosvenor House Publishing Ltd

Books which give an overview or an introduction to Christianity are as plentiful and varied as those who seek such a guide. Large academic tomes fill the shelves of libraries. There are those dispassionate descriptions of the Christian faith which aim to help students of religion in school and through to higher education. Church denominations and other religious bodies provide course material for those who may be enquirers, seeking baptism or confirmation. Amongst theological writers and commentators are those who have a passionate desire to communicate their own convictions and beliefs. And there are those who seek to self publish their own views on what constitutes the essence of the Christian faith.

Leonardo Boff and Marcus Braybrooke both write from their convictions about the importance of the teachings of Jesus and a transformative experience of the



mysterious God, whose kingdom on earth we are called to bring about. Both men have written these books (a revised edition in the case of Braybrooke) after long

and distinguished careers. The Brazilian Roman Catholic theologian Boff is the author of more than sixty books and is perhaps best known for his writings on liberation theology, with its concern for the poor and the marginalised. Braybrooke, a retired Anglican priest has been involved in interfaith work, especially through the World Congress of Faiths, of which he is currently Joint President.

Boff describes his book, Christianity in a Nutshell, as 'a kind of swan song', and it is characterised by Boff's insistence on seeing Christianity as a lived spirituality, empowered by a Trinitarian approach, describing God as Mystery, encountered through the incarnate Son, who embodies the justice and mercy of the divine. The first two chapters in which he wrestles with his framework of Trinitarian belief are not easy to comprehend, and certainly the exaltation of Joseph and Mary in the Divine outworking will not convince many of his readers of a less orthodox persuasion. However it is in subsequent chapters when the angry and combative Boff writes about the dream of God's reign on earth, the ethic of unlimited love and a Christianity subjected to the pathologies of power, that the book shines with passion and conviction.

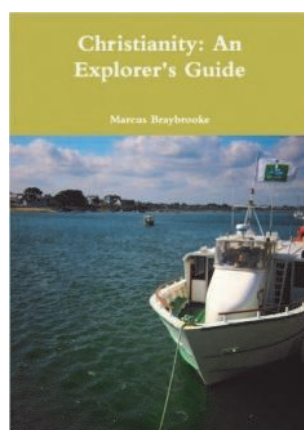
Boff, a catholic priest, has been silenced more than once by Rome and his love-hate relationship with organised religion is clearly seen again in this book. Boff distinguishes between the reign of God and the church, as do many contemporary writers. He writes in an uncompromising way :

"Its (the Church's) greatest merit is that of preserving the sacred memory of Jesus, not letting his dream die, creating conditions for anticipating it in history with initiatives arising out of love and compassion, but it can also be a hindrance to the gospel by the way it is organised: hierarchical, authoritarian and doctrinaire." (p.91)

Through an imaginative discourse about the Lord's Prayer, Boff sees the core message of God, incarnated through Jesus and experienced in the Spirit as hungering for God and hungering for God's reign of justice so that all may be fed in body and soul. This is an inspiring essay in how liberation theology, rooted in a Trinitarian spirituality, can indeed be seen as Christianity in a nutshell. For some, Boff's theology will be too conservatively rooted but for others his cry against the inadequacies of the catholic church will be refreshingly challenging.

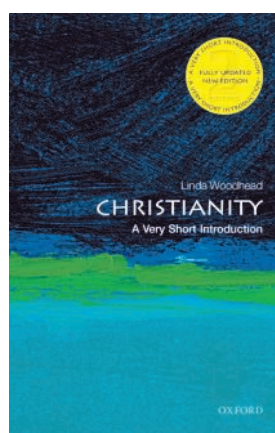
In contrast Braybrooke, in his Explorer's Guide, takes an encyclopaedic approach over 300 pages, beginning with examples of those people in history who have had life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ, from Paul to Mother Teresa. This is followed by chapters ranging from a cursory glance at the findings of historical Jesus research, modern Christological debates

through the writings of a few liberal theologians, on God, Church history, prayer, ecumenical and interfaith



matters, shots at penal policy, factory reform and a host of other social issues. I confess to not warming to this

approach and I am unsure whom the book is intended for. It tries to cover far too many topics, resulting in shallowness. The issue of gay marriage is discussed in eight lines! He has written well on so many focussed topics, especially in terms of other faiths, and I feel that it would have been better not to have resuscitated 'The Explorer's Guide to Christianity' (1988). On the other hand, Linda Woodhead has chosen to revise her 2004 book in the Oxford Very Short Introduction series of books and this is well worth a read. Unlike Boff and Braybrooke, Woodhead writes in a dispassionate and disciplined academic fashion. She



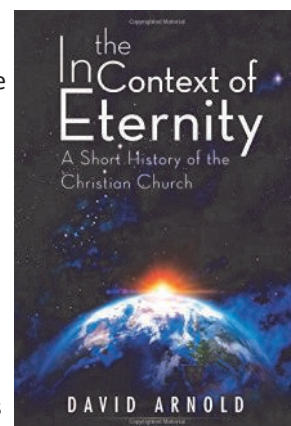
attempts in the first two chapters, quite impressively, to outline Christianity through the complexities of Jesus the God-man and then to survey the beliefs, rituals

and narratives of faith stemming from the different ways of seeing the significance of Jesus. She concludes her first chapter by stating that a religion which has a God-man at its centre is bound to be a religion full of tension, complication and creativity.

She goes on to distinguish three main types of Christianity, calling them Church, mystical and biblical types of Christianity. In the final chapter she describes contemporary movements within Christian faith as the Church and Christianity engage with the modern world. Again she is even handed in such description, and the book as a whole

conforms to a succinct overview. In short it does what it says on the tin - a Very Short Introduction. How truly satisfying such a summary is will depend on the needs of the reader.

Finally there is David Arnold's book, In the Context of Eternity. The strap line describes this as a short history of the Christian Church, albeit over 300 pages. Like



Braybrooke's offering, I am unsure who would want to have this book on their shelves. In some ways it is a remarkably wide sweep of the Christian church from the life of Jesus onwards through two thousand years of history. The author, with his long interest in ecclesiastical history, has an open mind in regard to the veracity of the biblical accounts of Jesus' life but nowhere in this book is there any lengthy development of any one subject. You can find a page on monasticism, on the Council of Constance(!), on the Fourth Crusade and so on. But equally a trip to Wikipedia would do the same.

These four books illustrate in different ways the challenge of presenting any concise overview of Christian faith. Far better perhaps than all of the above books is Diarmaid MacCulloch's A History of Christianity, now in paperback. It would also seem to me that to have on one's shelves a good Bible commentary (e.g. The Oxford Bible Commentary, ed. Barton and Muddiman) and then the kind of specialist books to suit one's interest (e.g. Maurice Casey on Jesus of Nazareth) is a far better investment.

**Adrian Alker**





# Sea of Faith Network 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference

## 'Religion - Where Next?'

Thursday 21st - 23rd July 2016  
Leicester University



**Doctor John Breadon**, Assistant Chaplain at Eton College

**Professor Denise Cush**, Professor of Religion and Education, Bath Spa University

**The Reverend Andrew Brown**, Minister of the Unitarian Memorial Church, Cambridge

This year, with the help of the above splendid speakers offering academic, theological and personal perspectives, and through our workshops, we shall be addressing perhaps our most important question ever. One for us all, as individuals, as a network and for the wider world.

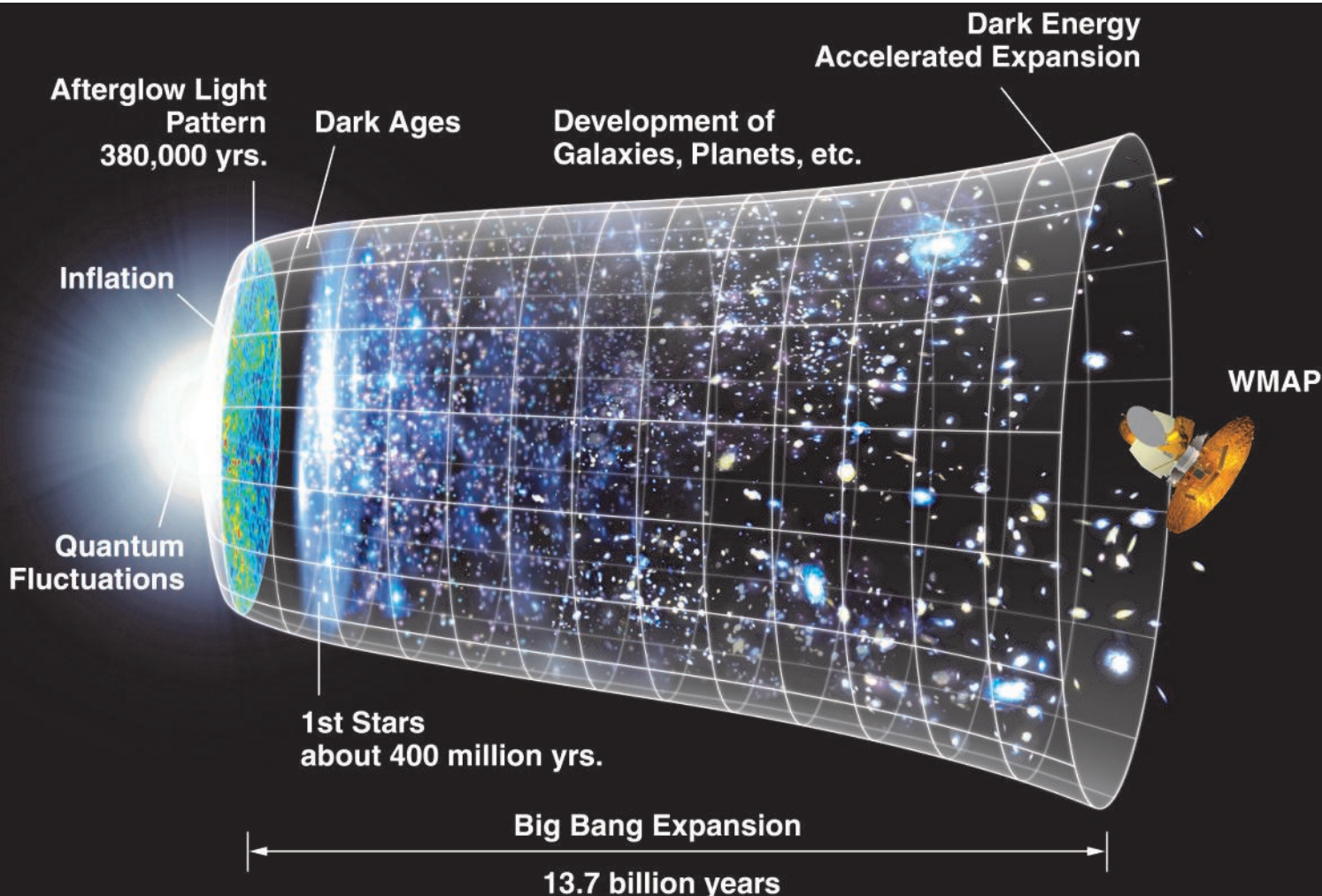
### Our conference title presumes so many other questions —

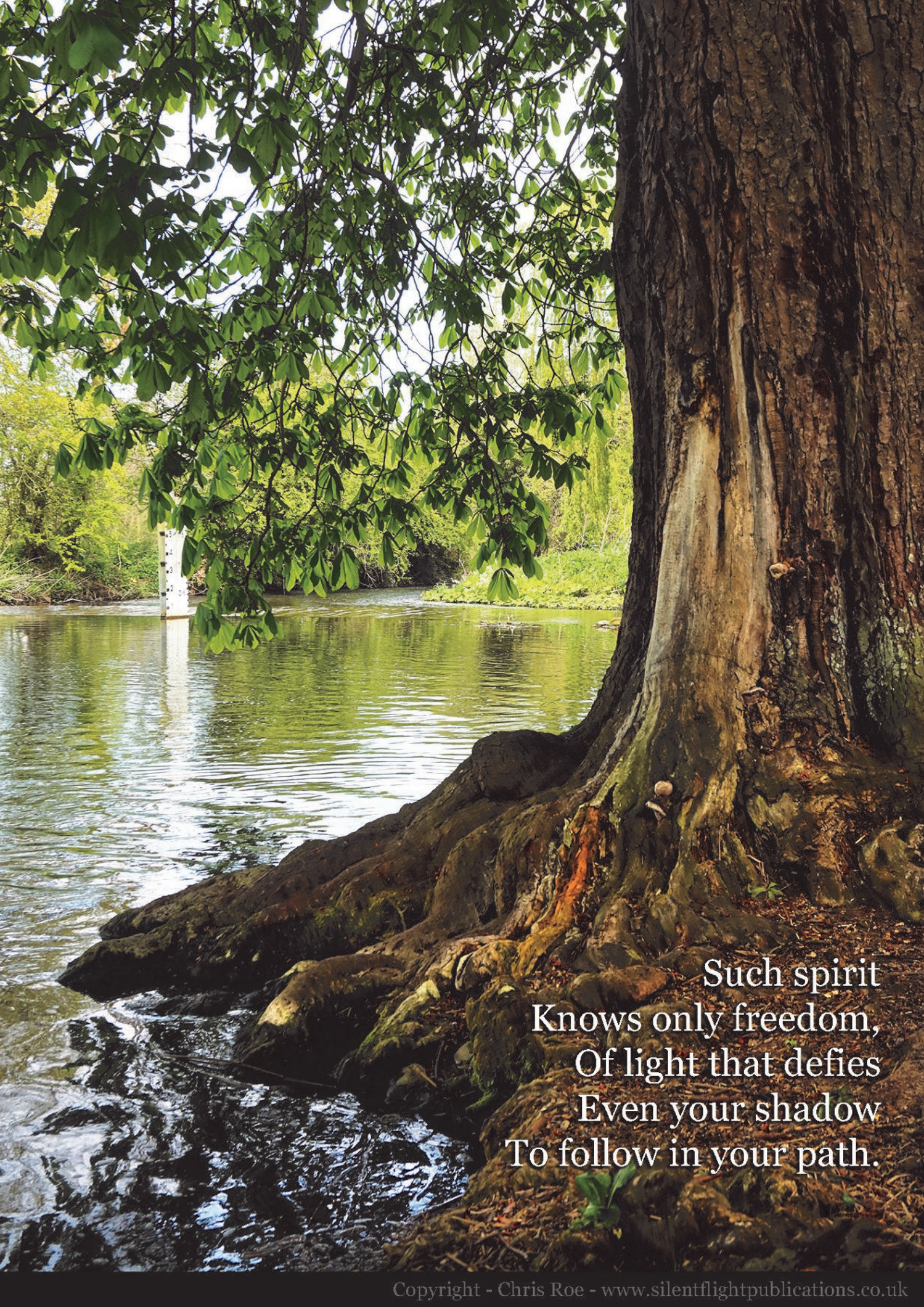
- What exactly is Religion – a cultural, social, psychological creation?
- What drives it and sustains it?
- Why does Religion continue to maintain its hold?
- Why do some live for it, some die for it and some even kill for it?
- What has it to offer, today and tomorrow, for “us” and for “them”?
- Who cares anyway?

Join us to help answer some of these, both for yourself and for others: [bookings@sofconference.org.uk](mailto:bookings@sofconference.org.uk)

As well as the contributions of our main speakers, the conference will include many special features: 'Speakers' Corner', six short presentations on a variety of subjects to be followed up later in workshops — 'Soul Music', members presenting their musical favourites — a Games Night — Films and YouTube videos — the second hand bookstall — A 'Tweet Board' (your chance to present ideas give feedback, etc.) and to start the day, "Paradise Illustrated" performed in the grounds and "Etched by Silence", the poetry of R.S. James. There will also be other workshops, seminars and discussion groups, more early morning and evening activities, base groups, and as always, plenty of time to talk to like-minded people.

## Time Line of the Universe



A large, ancient tree trunk with thick, gnarled bark and exposed roots dominates the right side of the frame. The roots spread out over rocks and into the water of a calm river. Lush green foliage hangs from the top left, framing the scene. In the background, a white marker with numbers is visible in the water, and a dense forest lines the opposite bank.

Such spirit  
Knows only freedom,  
Of light that defies  
Even your shadow  
To follow in your path.