

Progressive Voices



June 2018

For Lyndi Fourie



Forgive our deafness
Our ears are modulated
To hear voices of the dead
Counselling us from your tomb
We leap at your still commands

Hands that unleashed thunder on you
Nine summers ago
This summer tremble before your throne

In the twilight of our age
The angry soldier breezed from the bush
Tried in vain to hate
Succeeded in hurting
Today the guerrilla is foraging in the bush
For herbs
To heal hearts swollen with grief

Show us
How to muffle the roars of our rage
How to dam the rivers of our tears
How to share laughter and land
Land and laughter

Forgive our idiocy
Our souls are tuned
To heed prophecy
By the graveside of the prophet
Whose blood we spilt
Whose teachings we ridiculed
While he walked among us

Letlapa Mphahlele

Welcome

After our themed issue we return to an eclectic mix of news, reports, reflections, poems, prayers, and hymns. Our AGM event opened up the theme of hymns and it is continued here. Andy Thomas reflects on how to select and sing them, Adrian Alker encourages us to gather to sing some, John Hack responds to Richard Firth, and Chris Avis offers us one to sing together.

We are delighted to hear from Letlapa Mphahlele as he reflects on his life and shares the poem on the left.

We also have responses to Dave Tomlinson's call to be 'black sheep', and dates for other conferences this year.

We will ponder honesty, Ascension Day and Heaven, psychotherapy, our souls, and ... data protection.

Welcome to the 25th edition of Progressive Voices.

Enjoy!

Dave Coaker

Prayer for Gaza

Come, Lord Jesus, end this horror.

Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come.

As we are watching the headlines from Gaza unfold before us in desperation we don't have any words to pray coherent prayers today.

From deep in our spirits all we can voice are heart

-cries of pain, longing for the violence to stop; aching for no more lives bearing your precious image to be taken here; despairing that children are already among the dead.

Come, Lord Jesus, end this horror.

Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come.

Wrap your presence around those whose whole word has been shattered; and shatter the plans of any in our world who seek escalation, rather than peace.

Liz Baddaley, Embrace the Middle East

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

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.

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From a young age I wanted to be a teacher, initially from the rather naive perspective of wanting to be on the correcting rather than the completing side of exercises. Later on I found myself fascinated by language and learning foreign languages. During my university course I decided that teaching German was my 'thing', even though in my first year I taught English in Germany; so much for a bit of autobiography.

From my university days onwards I have done numerous (and mostly unpaid) translations for people in all sorts of contexts. I have been aware ever increasingly that very often one cannot translate word for word into or from a foreign language, that the context matters, that the target hearers or readers have to be taken into account, etc. A friend of a friend was to give a talk in English in Greece; thinking he might try to say good evening to his audience in Greek, he met with stony silence when he addressed his listeners as 'toilets and urinals'. You can probably imagine how he came up with that!

Of course misunderstandings occur within the English language as well as between languages. The many school and student trips and exchanges abroad that I have been involved with have been an important feature of my teaching career; the church I attend has a three-way partnership with a church in former West Germany and another in the former GDR. On many occasions there was a need for someone like me to sort out any misunderstandings. It was interesting when the original two-way church partnership became a three-way one after 1989; a draft document was drawn up in English, which was then translated into German by one German church and by me for the other. Both translations were obviously describing the same thing, yet there were a few variations and nuances indicating slightly different interpretations. Interestingly the parable of the Good Samaritan is known in German Bibles as the parable of the Merciful Samaritan.

A few years on, while training for the ministry, we learned a great deal about the context,

the authors, the different genres employed in the composition of books of the Bible; if we add to all that the interpretations, translations, also mistranslations, mistakes etc., the result is hardly going to be the inerrant word of God, is it? Apart from many partial translations, over 100 translations of the whole Bible exist in English, with some versions containing more books than most.

At some point in the 80s I attended a study day at my church on 'The Gospels as Propaganda'. Although I had already begun travelling along the progressive path, I recall being rather taken aback by the word 'propaganda', which I had up until then seen only as something negative. Happily I came to see that the gospel writers each had a different target audience in mind, so causing them to give their individual take on the impact of the life and teachings of Jesus.

My 'wow' moment of the day, however, was when the leader asked us to imagine a single star standing over one single stable. I hadn't ever thought about that particular aspect of the story. So why, I asked, did nobody ever tell us from the pulpit that the gospel accounts were stories or propaganda? Why was there never any mention of the intentions of the writers? It is, I think, well known that most clergy will have at least come across this kind of thing when training. At coffee after a service I took, a retired minister told me he had not heard (or presumably imparted) the background knowledge I had given since his own days at college. How sad is that!

But it's not just clergy. I believe we all have an obligation to spread the progressive word, not in any aggressive or confrontational way, but as opportunity presents itself. We must challenge assumptions made about what we might understand as 'God' or Christianity and remind ourselves and others of the gist of the Toni Morrison quote from our PCN Eight Points leaflet: 'Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined.' I love language; for all sorts of reasons it is important and necessary for communication, it can be powerful and evocative, but ultimately even the noblest language will be inadequate.

Sandra Griffiths serves as
the Secretary of PCN Britain
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Your letters

I want to express my thanks for the companionship and encouragement I have received from the trustees who I have worked alongside these past three years. I decided not to stand for another three years at the last AGM. I felt that I wanted to make space for a younger person, with bright and new ideas. I have loved every minute of working with the thoughtful and dedicated people who make up the trustees and I would encourage all members to think about standing for election next year. I am still convenor of the Newcastle Group and will still be involved with planning the next Members' Residential weekend. It will be a study weekend based on John Shelby Spong's book, 'Unbelievable'. The book was reviewed in PV24. One of the comments after last year's residential was that we worked too hard. Perhaps it will prove to be a more gentle time this year! Just to have space to talk and get to know each other is so special and it is good to have a theme that ties the weekend together. In order for PCN Britain to function it requires much dedication from the trustees. We are very fortunate to have such a team and give thanks that I was privileged to be one of them. I wish the whole trustee team, also including Sarah, our administrator, and Christine, our minute secretary, under the chair-ship of Adrian, continued success in everything they do on behalf of all the members of PCN Britain

Pat Fuller

I must say how much I have appreciated the Green Spring article in PV. It has opened valuable new perspectives for me, leading to the writings of Thomas Berry who I believe sadly died in 2006. Something about his work and ideas for a future piece in PV?

James Sargent

PV24: What an impressive collection of articles. I found it most encouraging.

Michael Wright

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

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

Solas Festival

Perth, Scotland on 22-24 June

Solas is like Greenbelt in miniature – about 1600 people, hard to get lost and a great line up of music, arts and discussion. It's a real all-age event with lots to do for kids. PCN will be co-hosting a talk and discussion entitled "Celtic Christianity - what our Christian heritage could have been?" Our partners in the event are Place for Hope, an interesting Scottish organisation. Its aim is to 'accompany and equip people and faith communities so that all might reach their potential to be peacemakers who navigate conflict well.'

Jon Cape of PCN Forth Valley will lead the event.

<http://www.solasfestival.co.uk/>

2018 Marcus Borg Memorial Conference

Rev Canon Marianne Wells Borg

'Days of Awe and Wonder: How we see makes all the difference'

Saturday 20 October 2018

St. Marks Broomhill, Sheffield,
S10 2SE

<https://marcusjborg.org/>

Free to Believe

National Conference

8th to 10th November 2018

Diana Butler Bass

The Hayes, Hayes Ln, Swanwick,
Alfreton DE55 1AU

www.freetobelieve.org.uk

Worship and Bible Studies led by
Trevor Dennis.

Ensuite at £195 with a few non-ensuite rooms at £175 per person.
conferences@freetobelieve.org.uk

THE
NECESSITY
OF
HOPE



Sea of Faith

31st National Conference

24th – 26th July 2018

Stamford Court, Leicester University

sofconference.org.uk

Richard Norman

Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Kent; joint editor of Religion and Atheism – Beyond the Divide

Dinah Livingstone

Poet, Translator and Editor of Sofia, speaking on Hope for Humanity – A Theology of Liberation and the Beautiful City

Including:

Short talks by SOF members
The Forum – workshops, seminars, and discussion
Music and crafts, related to Hope.
Base groups focussed on exploring our understanding of Hope
Sea of Faith Conference
12 Sandringham Avenue
Hoylake, Wirral, CH47 3BZ
Tel 0151 632 4385

Members' Residential

12–14 October 2018

Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today

The Hayes, Hayes Ln, Swanwick,
Alfreton DE55 1AU

We will be looking at Bishop Spong's latest book of this title. We ask you to purchase (and read) the book beforehand. . The cost of the weekend will be £160 per person, en-suite. Please contact Sandra Griffiths
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk

A journey towards freedom

Letlapa Mphahlele was born and grew up in rural South Africa during the height of apartheid. At the age of seventeen he went into exile to join the liberation struggle. Rising through the ranks of the Azania People's Liberation Army, the military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress, he became its director of operations. In 1993 he ordered several high profile retaliatory massacres, including at St James' church, Cape Town during a church service one Sunday evening. Eleven people were killed and 58 injured. Another massacre was at the Heildleberg Tavern where Lyndi Fourie, a student, was amongst those killed. Her mother Ginn later forgave Letlapa. This was pivotal in his transforming journey.

In 2003 Letlapa met Howard Grace, a member of PCN, who invited him to the UK and took him to 36 Sixth Forms in six weeks, as part of the Initiatives of Change Schools Service, to share his story. This later led to the making of the award winning film 'Beyond Forgiving' <https://uk.iofc.org/Post-Apartheid-Beyond-Forgiving> which documents what has developed from this profound experience with Ginn Fourie. (Howard Grace, is happy to show the film and facilitate discussion howardgrace40@gmail.com) Letlapa's life journey has led him to a passion to foster a common humanity. An atheist, in this article he shares his spiritual journey.

If all life is a journey, mine started 57 years ago. I was born into religion, swinging between belief in ancestors and in the Christian God. Then I ditched the ancestors as my divine guardians and stuck to one God, as described in the bible. Growing up in white-dominated South Africa, where the rulers publicly professed their belief in the doctrine of Herrenvolkism (meaning 'God's chosen people' in Afrikaans, an offshoot of the Dutch language). For me the Christian faith increasingly merged into politics: the politics of oppressive power. Then I ditched that God too, who had 'chosen people.' I found myself godless. It was therefore easy for me to embrace atheism at the age of twenty.

Be that as it may, I do not judge people by what they believe, or don't believe. Beliefs, or the absence thereof, do not necessarily make people good or bad. I learnt that many years ago, when in exile in neighbouring Botswana. I believed I was a freedom fighter. Together with my comrades, we all believed in freedom. We could not have left our homes and families in pursuit of freedom if we did not believe in it. But little did we know, that we knew very little about freedom. It took one football game to unmask us as oppressors in freedom fighters' skin. A group of us visited a neighbouring village to play football. The opposing team consisted of Khoisan players, what the wider world knows as Bushmen. They outplayed us, outthought us and dominated the game from the first whistle to the

last. The referee, who happened to be one of us, made us winners against all the rules of the game. A hollow victory it was. At the end of the game, as we headed to the refugee camp where we lived, we all agreed we could not let Bushmen beat us. This was more than a game of football, it was an arena of prejudice. We believed in freedom. Freedom for ourselves, not for others. We resisted white supremacy. But we carried ethnic supremacy in our hearts, in our heads. It is possible to have a freedom fighter who doesn't know what freedom is. I'm a living example.

In a journey, we discover new places. Most importantly, we also discover ourselves. We learn a lot by listening to our friends. But we learn even more by listening to our enemies, or to the people we regard as our enemies. By listening to what they have to say. And even by listening to what they do not say. By listening to their words and to their silence with equal, intense attentiveness. In a small South African town of Aliwal North, perched on the banks of Orange River, I was privileged to listen to a man who had survived APLA bullets. The acronym stands for Azanian People's Liberation Army. His friend was not lucky enough, he died in the ambush. The man appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to give evidence of what had happened on that fateful day. Cross examination ensued:

'Would you forgive the men who killed your friend?'
'Yes.' The man answered without hesitation. *'Why?'* *'I'm a trained soldier. They obeyed orders and so do I. Were I in their position, I could have done what they did.'*

His words melted away the wall of enmity I had erected between us. Amnesty was granted to all the applicants on that particular incident. So, even as we carry the burden of grudge and resentment, it's possible that the 'other' has long made peace with the past and moved on. We grow a bit taller by discovering that the people we believed were beasts, are actually more humane than ourselves. If a man walks in the moccasins of someone who has caused death to his friend, that man is sending a message humanity should listen to.

As we journey far and wide, we don't only gain insight into the lie of the land, we also lose our short-sightedness and superstitions. At first we think we're the paragons of humanism, and others are ambassadors of all that should be flattened for the new world to rise on the ruins of the defeated others. Nature abounds with colours. It is said, "There are no black and white answers to multi-coloured questions." It is sometimes convenient though to see the universe in black and/or white lenses. It is even more convenient if your oppressor is white and espouses white supremacy.

In the wake of APLA attacks on white targets, which I had authorised as director of operations, a journalist asked me if I would object meeting a survivor of the

attack I had ordered. Surely I had no objection? A meeting was arranged and at last I was face-to-face with Charl van Wyk, the man who had survived a deadly attack on St. James Church in Cape Town and had actually shot back at the APLA attackers. We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Charl made it crystal clear that he was meeting me in his personal capacity, and that he was not mandated by the church to meet me. On my side, I told him how violent history of colonialism had angered me and my generation to the point where we resorted to violence as a means of ending violence.

Charl is a deeply religious man. An old school Christian if there is one. He compares same-sex intimate relationship with bestiality and he argued that it should be criminalised. In one of our subsequent meetings he invited me to a church service. I told him, that as an atheist, I do not attend church services or services of any religious group. However, because I was not invited by a religion, but invited by a man on a mission to heal our wounded past, I willingly accepted the invitation. After decades of staying away from church services, I found myself attending one with the 'enemy', at the invitation of the 'enemy'. Some saw the miracle of God at work. I saw a huge human potential in overcoming the barriers of 'othering'. The man I hated, to the point of planning his death, once I got to know him I enjoyed his company and his sense of humour. In appearance he was different from me; he was white and he was a Christian. In essence we all have common hopes for security, prosperity and happiness for our families and communities. In essence we all harbour common fears of disease, poverty and death. Culture, race and faith (or the absence of it) are just appearances, oftentimes misleading appearances hiding our common humanity. The meeting with Charl was a memorable landmark of my journey.

The story of journey will be incomplete without relating how I met, and later worked together with, Ginn Fourie. She had suffered a greater loss than Charl. Her daughter, Lyndi, died in an attack which I had ordered. She had every reason to hate me, and even to hate the ground I trod on. The first time I met Ginn it was at the event hosted by Cape Town Press Club. Never before had I come so close to a person who had lost her beloved child as a result of my decision. This was the beginning of a tearful journey.

In our follow-up meeting, Ginn asked me if I believed in God. For an atheist the answer was obvious. Unperturbed, she asked me if I believed in spirituality. Yes, I told her that I believe that every human being has a spiritual dimension, if by spirituality we mean connectedness with oneself, with the community and with the cosmos. She then said in spite of the pain and the loss I caused her, she forgave me. No words can describe how I felt at that time. The moment defies description in words. I felt my humanity being restored by someone who I had identified as a legitimate target



of the armed struggle. Earlier on charges of terrorism and murder were withdrawn against me by the court of law. But there's no law, that I know of, which says people must forgive the killers of their children. When charges were withdrawn, I felt nothing compared to when Ginn, unmasked, uttered words of forgiveness. The feeling of gratitude was deep and intense. To date I'm still thankful to Ginn for the gift of forgiveness. The TRC could have given me a legalistic pardon, freeing me from civil and criminal liabilities. All the courts did was to withdraw the charges. Yet beyond great conflict, beyond what the law can prescribe, people need to reach out to each other in their personal capacities and build bridges of brother/sisterhood. Beyond prejudices we inherited from our forebears, across the fences and walls we erect around ourselves, across doctrines and dogmas we uphold, perhaps it helps to acknowledge that there's a thread that runs through all the ideologies and all the schools of thought: common humanity. And if we recognise humanity in others, no matter how different from us they look and dress and talk and worship, we'll be nourishing and watering the roots of our own humanity. Even as we draw battle lines, we ought to recall that among people we designate as enemies, there are Ginns and Charl's. If only we can magnify our common humanity. Is this a vision that can unite atheists like myself with a variety of religious believers where we come together for a greater "Yes" - the reality of a shared humanity.



Letlapa Mphahlele is the author of a book of poetry entitled 'Mantlalela!: The Flood Is Coming'.

Black Sheep

Come out of the closet!

That was the message I received loud and clear during the stimulating evening presented to those of us gathered for a PCN and friends meeting at St. Mark's, Harrogate, on a chilly Monday evening in March. Dave Tomlinson gave a spirited and challenging account of his Christian journey, Evangelical to Liberal and beyond, before expounding some of the concepts from his latest book *Black Sheep and Prodigals*.

For the past eighteen years Dave Tomlinson has been the vicar of St. Luke's in West Holloway (London). Like many of us he believes that despite the falling off of church attendance in the Western world, many people still have a spiritual outlook and are looking for answers, or at least opportunities, to explore their spirituality in a safe environment.

The book *Black Sheep and Prodigals*, Dave explained, deals with big and complicated questions such as 'what is sin?' and 'what about atonement?' but in a far from traditional manner, and for me at least, in a way that makes God a God of love and justice as exemplified by the teachings of Jesus, and not as imaged by the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of the mainstream churches over centuries.

He cited various examples of the inclusivity of Jesus' teaching and reiterated that God is for everyone; there should be no 'in' or 'out' groups of people. I have long believed that God is God - irrespective of faith label, and I was pleased to hear him talk about this with authority and conviction, and furthermore, he posited the idea that in fact Jesus' birth was an interfaith event. (Think about it!)

I cannot do justice to the book or the talk in a few words, but I was very much taken with the idea that the church, in its approach to theological and spiritual teaching, has more in common with key stage 1 and 2 methodology than with higher level approaches to teaching. (Remember St. Paul's comments about 'pap'?)

Key words and phrases for me were: love, justice, community, inclusivity, challenge, and the importance of spiritual and intellectual honesty within one's faith.

So I return to the title of this piece. If we have the courage of our convictions, have a progressive and liberal outlook on Christianity, perhaps we should 'Come out of the closet', stand up and be counted within our circle of friends, albeit within the context of sensitivity and love. Thank you, Dave, for your stimulating talk.

Liz Bassant is a retired London Primary school teacher. Still active CofE Reader. Licensed Chelmsford 1995, transferred to Leeds 2009.



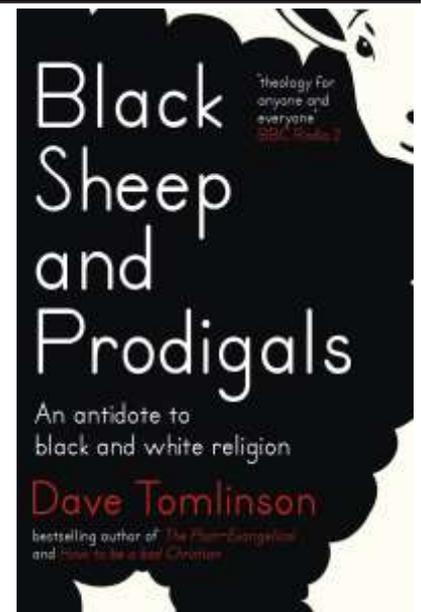
On a Tuesday evening in March we were welcomed by the members of the Newcastle PCN group into "St Thom's" Church in the centre of the city, with freshly baked scones and a glass of wine or juice. People turned up after work to hear Dave Tomlinson as part of his tour promoting his new book "Black Sheep and Prodigals". The church was comfortably full as Dave began his presentation.

He explained why he had chosen the title for the book and identified himself as a black sheep of the Anglican Church –for whom gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and style of Christianity are important elements for acceptance and inclusion. He stressed that he was firmly within the Anglican flock, but somewhat on the margins of the fold. As in his books Dave took a positive line, and loyalty to the Jesus-figure shone through, but some of the culture and traditions of religion as expressed by the Church were dismissed as he spoke about the important elements experienced in his ministry and his discipleship.

Conformity was never his starting point, rather he dealt with questions and uncertainty in a church where people don't toe the line and are often at the edges of faith. It was heart-warming to hear of people thinking independently, and this was an aspect that the audience could identify with. He promoted a "grown up" approach to Christianity focused on a "way to be".

Afterwards Dave signed my copy of his book "to a fellow black sheep", and I was glad to be identified as such.

Joyce Firth



Jesus Solana from Madrid, Spain [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

What Price Honesty?

I began to write my book 'Is a Radical Church Possible?' in 2013, which coincided with the 50th anniversary of the publication of Bishop John Robinson's 'Honest to God'. I guess the majority of PCN members will recall the profound effect of that little SCM paperback upon the Church of England and the wider church and its leaders. In the preface (well worth re-reading) to Robinson's book, he writes in somewhat Pauline style:

"For I am convinced that there is a growing gulf between the traditional orthodox supernaturalism in which our faith has been framed and the categories which the 'lay' world (for want of a better term) finds meaningful today."

That was just the beginning of a challenge to the church to engage honestly in a debate about its language, its principal doctrines and its future.

The church press recently reported on the latest British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) which revealed that the percentage of people who describe themselves as 'not religious' (the 'nones') is at its highest since the survey began. In 2016, 53% of respondents said that they did not belong to any particular religion. Back in 1983 that figure was 31%. For the C of E the percentage of people who associate themselves with the C of E has fallen in that time from 40% to 15% at present.

None of this is surprising and is in line with other data and other surveys. What did surprise me was the response of the Bishop of Liverpool who said "In this modern world, people are more willing to be honest and say they have no religion rather than casually saying they are 'C of E'. This honesty is welcome."

I find this advocacy of honesty by a serving bishop somewhat ironical since the leadership of the Church is quite prepared to welcome people's honesty but seems reluctant to open up an honest dialogue about the fundamentals of Christian faith. Of course bishops are in a difficult position, trying to please everyone. But what of their clergy and ministers in general? How honest is the preaching we hear when we know of the training and education in biblical critical scholarship that most clergy will have undertaken?

In 'retirement' I do have more time to enjoy my gardening and I am reminded of the plant called Honesty or to give it its proper name Lunari annua. The text books always say two things about this flower - that it is old fashioned and secondly that its autumn foliage, beloved by flower arrangers, is translucent or transparent, you can clearly see right through the leaves. Taking our cue from the flower, is honesty an old fashioned virtue? How transparent is our religious, public and personal life?

Running through my own book is the underlying conviction that we need to be honest about all the fruits of historical research about the person of Jesus. Honest about his birth, his life, his teachings, his death. This

honesty comes for an honest acceptance that the Bible is a great mixture of fact and metaphor, myth, legend, poetry and story and we can't mix them all up as though somehow they are all 'true'.

Secondly in my book I argue that we need to be honest about the Church – how it came into being, its own fallibilities as an organization. Unlike the flower, the leadership of the church is not altogether transparent, for example, in how it selects its leaders, if we recall the botched and controversial appointments of both the Bishop of Sheffield and the Bishop of Llandaff in recent months.

Another example of honesty and dishonesty in religion and the church was highlighted in an editorial comment in the Guardian newspaper on September 25th, in regard to the Pope's apparent wish to liberalise the church's treatment of divorced people. The Guardian reminded its readers that the vast majority of the world's Catholics take little note of catholic doctrine when they disagree with it, be it over birth control or abortion. So what price honesty?

If we expect high standards of honesty from the Church, do we also expect the same standards in our public life? Was there a time when politicians, bank managers, builders and company bosses were people whom you trusted, respected and on the whole knew that they told the truth, earned very good but not outrageously excessive salaries, and cared for the common good? Do we seem to live in a different age today or is that simply untrue? I personally have great respect for most politicians, be they M.P.'s or local councillors. Yet there are clear examples of how greed leads to dishonesty, to fiddling expenses and hiding information. We read of supermarket directors charged with fraud, airlines not disclosing the full truth to customers and weekly on the TV programme Watchdog, a whole host of 'rogue traders' are exposed.

So why is there so much corruption, dishonesty and lack of transparency in many dealings? Has it always been so? What price morality? Are ethical codes of practice an outdated concept in an amoral world? Has religion lost its force in promoting high standards of behaviour? Or in fact has corruption, dishonesty always been there and in fact we are now exposing such dishonesty in a more open and honest way?

It would be good to hear your views on honesty and what a progressive Christian faith might have to offer in this debate.

Adrian Alker serves as the Chair
of PCN Britain
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Ascension Day and Heaven

The Ascension marks the departure of Jesus from Earth back to Heaven to be with his Father. It is celebrated 40 days after Easter Sunday (the Resurrection) and is a major Christian Festival, alongside Christmas, Easter and Pentecost (the latter of which we celebrated 10 days after the Ascension).

In recent years, perhaps the Ascension isn't given the importance it once had. This is possibly because the old view of the Ascension envisages a three-part universe, with the heavens above a flat Earth (centred on Jerusalem) in the middle and the underworld below. This three-part universe is no longer acceptable and the Ascension is often discredited as Jesus clearly wasn't ascending to a physical place called Heaven above the Earth. Of course, in this model the heavens are separated from the Earth by the 'firmament,' i.e. the visible sky. Humans looking up to the sky would see the floor of Heaven, made of clear blue lapis-lazuli (Exodus 24: 9 – 10).

In fact, to modern day Christians who are cosmologists, the Ascension is seen as a remnant of an outmoded cosmology. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann in his essay 'The New Testament and Mythology' states 'We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted...no one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven...and if this is so, the story of Christ's...ascension into Heaven is done with.'

And a reminder of what the creeds tell us, 'He ascended into Heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.'

So what can we say about the Ascension today?

Well, first of all, we should not be too negative and dismissive of the Ascension. Jesus ascending in the way he did would have been a powerful witness to his disciples, who did, of course, believe that Heaven lay above us, above the sky. The universe to them was a mystery and to have God dwelling in this mysterious place would have been quite acceptable. And if you give it some careful thought how else could Jesus demonstrate that he was leaving them? What better way than upwards into a mysterious, unknown place!

Which leaves us with an interesting question – 'How would a modern-day Jesus decide to leave us?' Probably not upwards into the sky, as 1. we now have the technology to be able to track where he was going, and 2. we also know that Heaven isn't a physical place above the Earth. I suspect, in the knowledge of modern day cosmology, he would probably just disappear before our very eyes into another dimension (after all, modern cosmology often assumes there are more than the 3 dimensions of space and one dimension of time). Of course, like the mystery of what was above the sky to the disciples of old, existence of a 5th. or 6th. etc.

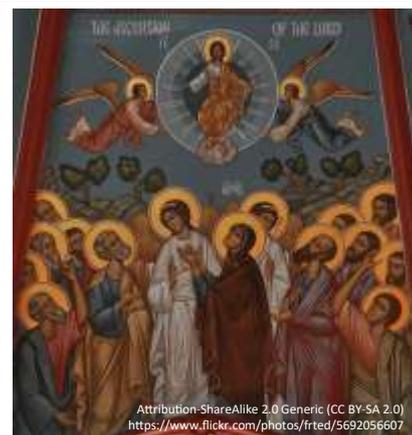
dimension is a mystery to us today. (Is there really a parallel Universe?) Perhaps in another 2,000 years people will look back on us today, with a knowledge of extra dimensions of space and/or time and dismiss our puny knowledge as we dismiss the puny knowledge of a world 2,000 years ago!

Also, just disappearing before our eyes isn't really as spectacular as ascending up through the clouds. Yet, it is a Biblical concept. Philip disappears before the eyes of the Ethiopian eunuch after their encounter on the desert road, 'When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the city of Azotus!' I don't think this has ever been explained away satisfactorily by theologians. The nearest we get is that the Holy Spirit is somehow responsible.

And of course, the opposite can also occur, in other words it is a Biblical phenomenon to suddenly 'appear', just as it is to 'disappear.' Jesus does so in his first major post-resurrection appearance to his disciples in John 20: 19, 'the disciples were appearing behind locked doors...suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them!'

The Ascension as depicted in Acts 1 may not point to a physical reality, namely Heaven above the Earth, but it does get, as Hercules Poirot would say, 'the little grey cells' thinking about what Heaven may really be like. Is it really another physical place, if so where? Certainly not immediately above the Earth. The problem with this suggestion is that if we are not careful we can see Jesus as distant, perhaps like the Deist view of the Age of Enlightenment.

Or is Heaven around us, in another dimension which we cannot yet be part of? I favour this view. One day the cosmologists may confirm extra dimensions to the Universe and that would open possibilities to this option. However, we may never know, knowledge of Heaven may always remain beyond our comprehension. Only death will reveal the truth!



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Tim Robinson is a liberal Church of England vicar and a recent member of PCN.



Response to 'Can't Sing!'

Forgive the metaphor, but Richard Firth's 'Can't sing' in PV24 struck a chord with me, as it is something I have struggled with as a chorister and progressive. Much church-going has been unnecessarily annoying because of inappropriate hymns. Recognising that any discussion about hymns – and especially music – will be essentially subjective, I would like to offer the following response:

Having grown up in a "liberal Anglican" parish as a young choirboy, I was conscious of the sensitivity of worship material. Our vicar once vetoed the harvest hymn 'Come ye thankful people' because not all had been 'safely gathered in' as a result of bad weather. We sang the psalms with great attention to the words. We did not regard them as the 'Word of the Lord' as all Biblical material seems to be regarded today (in the liturgy at least) but as the emotions of the poet in conversation with God – joy at the destruction of enemies, the beauty of creation, deep depression, or (most memorably) the graphic description of a terrible fever (in Psalm 22).

I went up to Cambridge at about the time of 'Honest to God', and joined the Twentieth Century Church Light Music Group based in the University Church but with a wide ecumenical membership. This started out as the application of 'light' music to old hymns, with a very few new ones by Patrick Appleford and others. After a year, and perhaps influenced by a visit by Sydney Carter (*Your holy hearsay is not evidence / Give me the good news in the present tense*), we realised that the problem was with words just as much as the music. We reformed as the worship group "Reflection", in order to reflect the then 'New' theology, producing a number of LPS and organising "New Dimensions in Worship" events and services. Incidentally, we successfully combined the organ and a choral group with electric guitars.

In the early 1970s, we produced an experimental LP and booklet for the Methodist Missionary Society on the theme of "Salvation Today". My wife and I compiled a list of hopefully appropriate hymns using the hymn books and supplements then available. Having ploughed through hundreds of hymns, only a few were really helpful, though some new material was beginning from the likes of Fred Kaan, Brian Wren and Fred Pratt Green. The last wrote a splendid hymn on salvation especially for the project (*Salvation! There's no better word for what Christ does for me*), set to the folk tune *Job/Dives and Lazarus* or its churchy equivalent *Kingsfold*. Perhaps typically, it has never been published in full in any hymn book as far as I know.

I don't have many problems with 'classic' hymns – even very old ones that go on about "pure virgins" – provided it is made very clear that this is what people sincerely believed in the past. What is depressing is the huge amount of new material reflecting the recent rise of more fundamentalist thought in the churches that

brainwash congregations into penal substitution and expectations of the apocalypse. Fortunately, there is also a fair amount of good material from such as Marty Haughan and John Bell (*Let us build a house* and *Heaven shall not wait*, although hymn book compilers steer clear of truly meaningful and biting material where possible.) It has always been thus – GK Chesterton's *O God of earth and altar* caused a storm when it was included in the first English Hymnal a century ago. Indeed, the then Archbishop of Canterbury wanted to ban the whole book, so perhaps the message is to stay true to the Magnificat and follow Fred Kaan – *Sing we a song of high revolt!*

John Hack is a member of the Woking group and a lifelong chorister



Eternal Lather

The ship is sinking, what's to do?

Outdated cargo must be saved.

Commands are needed by the crew;

The storms of change cannot be braved.

Put out the chairs upon the deck,

Arrange them to avoid a wreck.

This ship was built to last and last

By Constantine at quite a cost.

With creedal hull from ages past

It surely now cannot be lost?

We're drifting on an open sea

With charts of old theology.

Why can't we gather drowning souls

And pull them safely up on board

With prayer to plug our gaping holes

And gain a Saving Lives Award?

Our lifeboat Bible, word for word,

Is all that's needed to be heard.

All hands on deck! Return to port

Before we find ourselves submerged.

Ship building needs updated thought:

More buoyant relevance is urged,

Where intellect is not abused

And common sense is well infused.

Tune: Melita

Chris Avis



Selecting and Singing Hymns

A Progressive Approach

Introduction

On a particularly snowy Saturday in mid-March (the second iteration of the 'Beast from the East') I co-led a PCN workshop on 'Singing Hymns Again for the First Time'. The purpose was to present a range of hymns/songs/chants (for brevity: 'hymns') that might work for progressive folk.

To introduce the workshop, I offered my take on the purpose of church music and how hymn-singing fits into it. I didn't have time to say much, so I was pleased when Adrian asked me to turn those thoughts into an article for *Progressive Voices*. This is the result.

What is the point of church music?

An obvious answer is that church music facilitates worship. But what is worship and how, consequently, is music meant to facilitate it?

'Worship' is often understood to refer to the ritual activity that takes place in church, usually on a Sunday. Sometimes it is understood to refer merely to the singing bit of that ritual. However, both interpretations are arguably too narrow. Scripture - particularly the writings of St Paul in the New Testament - suggests an understanding of 'worship' as something that encompasses one's whole life, not just that bit of it that happens in church on a pew.

This is perhaps clearest in Paul's often-quoted opening to Romans 12:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." (Romans 12:1; NIV)

By 'bodies' it means ourselves as a totality - all our thoughts, actions, habits, relationships, etc. - not just skin and bones. Ensuring that these are 'holy and pleasing to God' is, according to Paul, acceptable worship. Worship is much more than the fraction of our lives that is confined to ritual or other church-based activities.

Paul goes on to explain in practical terms what counts as acceptable worship:

1. Using your gifts for the good of the whole community;
2. Ministering effectively to one another in love and forgiveness;
3. Living in a right relationship with governing authorities; and
4. Fostering understanding and unity particularly amongst those with differing opinions within the body of Christ. (Romans 12-15)

We are used to thinking of church music as something that facilitates church services and other, similar events when we gather as Christians. However, if a purpose of church music is to facilitate worship in the full, Pauline sense of 'worship', it is meant to facilitate much more than what happens in church on a Sunday. In relation to 1-4 above, church music should:

1. Find ways of engaging *everyone* within the worshipping community, regardless of how musically talented or skilled they are, or what musical genre they naturally relate to. This means engaging individuals both as listeners and participants, and enabling the range of musical gifts in the community to flourish.
2. Contribute to pastoral work by, for example, offering a role and purpose to a newcomer who is trying to find their feet by encouraging them into the choir or worship band.
3. Offer a way of reflecting on issues that ought to concern governing authorities. In a democracy, part of being in a right relationship with governing authorities is to engage with them. Church music can facilitate this by, for instance, expressing the hope of freedom from oppression (e.g. *Heaven Shall Not Wait* by John Bell).
4. Foster unity, within and beyond the particular worshipping community. This means using, for example, culturally-distinctive music to celebrate the diversity within the community; and celebrating the diversity across Christian communities, such as by contributing to ecumenical services.

Church music as an agent of transformation

Another helpful way to explore the point of church music is to reflect on Paul's statement that the church is the body of Christ. Taking this equivalence as given, we can say that *church* music is, in some sense, *body-of-Christ* music. I find this to be an incredibly useful way of thinking about church music. For instance, it brings home how, just as Christ's body was both in the world (people could touch, embrace and harm him) and yet transcendent of it (in that his body, in some sense, lives on); so church music is both this-worldly (it is a series of physical actions that create vibrations in the air) and yet enables its listeners to glimpse something beyond the everyday.

It also brings home how church music is an agent of transformation. To understand this, it is necessary to recall that by the 'body of Christ', Paul meant that *the people who make up the church* are Christ's body. The church, for Paul, wasn't an institution or a set of buildings, but a group of people, formed into communities spanning a wide geographical area, who were continuing Christ's work. This involved ongoing transformation, both at the personal and community

level. Paul argued that this transformation is brought about most effectively by the way people act towards each other: in short, they should act in love, modelled on the teachings and example of Christ. As Paul put it succinctly, “love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8: 1 (NIV)).

Understood this way, ‘church’ music is not so much music that is associated with a particular institution or actions that take place in a particular sort of building, it is music that is *of* the people that make up the church. It is an activity people do to transform themselves, and those around them, into the body of Christ.

Building the body of Christ: selecting and singing hymns

How does the process of selecting and singing hymns help to transform individuals and communities into the body of Christ? We have already seen how, for Paul, this transformation is underpinned by individuals’ acting in a loving, Christ-like way towards one another, and part of that involves worship that respects 1-4 above. A good start would be to draw-out the implications of those principles for selecting and singing hymns:

1. Everyone should have the opportunity to sing, regardless of their skills and experience, including, if possible, in harmony. (A number of authors suggest that singing in harmony enables a richer sense of communion than singing together in unison (e.g. Guthrie, op. cit., p. 399; Stacy Horn, *Imperfect Harmony* (North Carolina: Algonquin, 2013), p. 172)) This means selecting hymns that are accessible to all by, for instance, introducing unfamiliar hymns sparingly and teaching them before the service.
2. Avoid lyrics that reinforce stereotypes and prejudice. It is not loving to blind people in the congregation to consistently choose hymns that treat blindness as a metaphor for stubbornness, for instance. (See, for example, *Amazing Grace*: “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see”.) Similarly with patriarchal and other forms of exclusive language.
3. Hymn choices should be responsive to significant issues facing society, encouraging the community to reflect on (for example) modern forms of slavery, or how we treat the Earth and its resources. Seek out wording that is not overly preachy – as Brian Wren puts it, that “brings [one’s] understanding of the Bible into conversation with [one’s] knowledge, experience, and understanding of today’s world”. (Brian Wren, *Praying Twice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), p. 179.)
4. Select distinctive hymns that celebrate the diversity in the worshipping community in all its forms. For example, when I was Director of Music of St John’s, Waterloo, we sang a psalm in Krio to celebrate Sierra Leone National Day, and it flew. Also, select hymns that are sufficiently non-distinctive to enable the diversity within the community to find themselves within the lyrics and music. Short and simple chants, such as those from the Taize and Iona communities, lend themselves to this.



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Conclusion

Church music is about far more than just making a beautiful sound. It is about building the body of Christ by engaging and ministering to everyone, in all their diversity, as listeners and participants. It is about transforming individuals and communities to become more Christ-like in the way they act towards others. Church music is just one catalyst in this process, but an important one; one that can contribute significantly or, in some cases, reverse it altogether. It is key, therefore, that we think creatively, carefully and sensitively when approaching the selection and singing of hymns.



Andy Thomas was, until recently, Director of Music of St. John’s, Waterloo and the Waterloo Festival.

AGM

Singing Hymns Again for the First Time!

Despite the very unseasonal snow on March 17th this year, over 50 people attended our AGM at the splendid United Reformed Church of St Andrew and St George in Bolton. At the AGM we thanked the outgoing trustees Pat Fuller, Maureen Foxall and Richard Gray and welcomed Mo Wills and Martin Bassant to the body of trustees. Peter Stribblehill gave a very lucid presentation of our financial position and more details of the AGM can be found on our website.

The official business over, we then enjoyed the stimulus and challenge of singing hymns, many of them new to us, and reflecting upon their theology in an informal and energetic way! Andy Thomas and Anne Padget led this part of the day. Many PCN groups have expressed interest in holding such a hymns-focussed type of day and we would be happy to hear from you.

Christianity and Psychotherapy

Mark Vernon is a well known writer, broadcaster and psychotherapist. In November he led the St Marks Centre for Radical Christianity autumn conference: 'Christianity and Inner Life'.

Jesus was a master of the inner life. He taught in parables so as to initiate transformations of perspective (Mk 4:11; Matt 13:13). He reformed the notion of the Kingdom of God, turning an expected social eruption into a discovery "within you" (Lk 17:20-21). The fullest realisation of his promises was a felt sense of participating in divine life:

"On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you." (Jn 14: 20).

He invited people to pray privately (Matt 6:6); to be renewed in quiet places (Mk 6:31); to cultivate a new direction of mind (Mk 1:15); and that the intention of a penitent person matters more than their outward actions (Lk 18:9ff).

An interior dynamic is present throughout Paul's letters, as well. The freedom he preached was unlike the freedom that would have been most familiar at the time, the civic freedom of the Roman citizen. Instead, he focused on a freedom of the will; to conform your mind to Christ (Rom 12:2). "I no longer live but Christ lives in me," Paul confessed (Gal 2:20).

Moreover, Jesus and Paul's attention to inner life contrasts with the prophets and writers of the Hebrew Bible. A study of the words of the Bible has shown that the New Testament is markedly more concerned with introspection than the Old Testament.

I labour the point because this all suggests that Christianity should be a rich source of wisdom on inner life, and therefore mental wellbeing. And indeed, the first few centuries of the church produced experts in what would now be called "depth psychology". Take the desert father, Evagrius Ponticus. He developed practical guides to inner life, showing how to navigate a way through the hate and envy, lust and gluttony - as well as faith and love - that are inevitably found there. He described and explored "eight terrible thoughts", which were later reviewed and misleadingly re-described as the Seven Deadly Sins.

The monastic and mystical traditions of the medieval church sustained and developed these insights. And then came the Reformation.

Much changed, for good and ill. But it introduced Christian Europe to Martin Luther's wariness of introspection, born of his spiritual struggles, and subsequently aided the closure of monasteries and convents across the continent. In England, the dissolution of religious houses was particularly intense, more or less destroying the wisdom tradition of Christian inwardness in about a decade. The church

historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch, tracks the revolution in *Silence: A Christian History*. He notes how the centrality of silence in Christian practice that was initiated by Jesus, and strengthened by the contemplative adepts of subsequent centuries, dissolved. "This was [now] to be an era of words, relentlessly clarifying the Word of God".

Psychotherapy can be regarded as a response to this crisis for inner life. It differs from psychiatry, which focuses on the biochemical aspects of mental health, and psychology, which focuses on the behavioural aspects, focusing instead on the dynamics of the mind. One of the founding figures of the movement, Carl Jung, regarded its significance in this way.

His father was a minister and he noticed how the churches had become ill-equipped to cope with the interior struggles of modern people. "The wave of interest in psychology which at present is sweeping over the Protestant countries of Europe is far from receding. It is coincident with a general exodus from the Church," he observed in a 1932 lecture, "Psychotherapists or the Clergy". He felt that the clergy were "insufficiently equipped to cope with the urgent psychic needs of our age" and that it was "high time for the clergyman and the psychotherapist to join forces to meet this great spiritual task." What he said then could be repeated now, over 80 years later.

The two traditions have not joined forces for a number of reasons. One is that the Reformation legacy lives on. For instance, church life today is frequently characterized by wordy liturgies and noisy services. To my mind, this explains why Buddhists are making the running when it comes to teaching meditation and mindfulness. Similarly, the culture of church professionals tends towards the workaholic, so much so that the Church of England, for one, is struggling to implement "minimum standards" for clergy wellbeing. This is serious: a fundamental rule of spiritual growth and psychological health is that they must be nurtured in those who would encourage others to foster them too.

Another reason for the distance between church and couch is to do with suspicion. Sigmund Freud was openly hostile to belief in God, tending to pathologize such convictions. He was one of the "masters of suspicion", alongside Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, with the upshot that psychotherapy is commonly thought to be inherently secular, if not atheistic. It is necessary repeatedly to aver that it is not. For one thing, most psychotherapists today won't read much Freud. They are much more likely to be guided by the work of those who came next, seminal figures such as Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, John Bowlby and Wilfred Bion.

Alongside such culture wars there are also turf wars. Anecdotally, I'd say that Christians are often inclined to feel that psychotherapy challenges what should be their

prerogative. There is a sense that prayer should be enough to secure mental health, for example, and that churches should only have to turn to psychotherapists in cases of breakdown or emergency.

Insofar as these suspicions obtain, they must change. Mental ill-health is too widespread for them to be indulged. Broadly speaking, I think they can change in two ways.

First, psychotherapy has a crucial part to play in mental health ministry. It is not that Christians should feel they must become therapists. Rather, psychotherapeutic insights offer ways of developing a feel for the inner life of people who are suffering psychologically that is invaluable when attempting to support them. In short, it can help care for the carers.

Second, psychotherapeutic insights are not only valuable when people feel unwell. They are valuable in the general transformation of life. Psychotherapy is, in effect, the inheritor of the introspective nous that has been valued by Christians all the way back to Jesus.

For example, where he talked about not seeing the plank in your own eye because of a preoccupation with the speck in a brother's (Matt 7:5), psychotherapy has mapped the subtle mechanisms of life-limiting and destructive projections. Where he spoke of the happiness of the pure in heart (Matt 5:8), psychotherapy has explored the distractions that can cloud an individual's heart and mind. Psychotherapy can also assist with discerning the significance of dreams, and becoming aware of the developmental forces that shape us from our earliest years. This, in turn, is about being freed to deepen connections with others, the world and, also, with God. That's why psychotherapy needs religious and spiritual traditions in return.

A further use is its illumination of the ways in which religion can be applied defensively and, at times, abusively. One person may attempt to by-pass their pain by pursuing a vocation or disciplining themselves, all the while concealing a brokenness inside. Another person may become attached to manipulative religious leaders because of a past that compels them unhealthily to depend on others.

When life is less shaped by the multitudinous, anxious concerns of the ego, it becomes more open to the wider horizons of God. But first, you've got to become aware of those anxious concerns. That's true of all of us, regardless of the status of our mental health. Only then can life become more aligned to the Spirit, and the divine reality in whom we live and move and have our being can become intimately trusted and known.



Mark Vernon is a
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GDPR

PCN Britain and the General Data Protection Regulation

If you are anything like me your inbox will have been filled up with emails headed with titles such as 'Don't lose touch' and 'Keep in contact'. This is because there has been a major change in the way that organisations can use your information, brought about by the GDPR.

I have been contacted by a couple of members asking why they haven't received a similar email or communication from us. There are various legal ways set out in the GDPR that an organisation can keep and use your data; one of those is Legitimate Interest and this is the basis that PCN Britain uses. Legitimate Interest, in our case, says that we can use your information to contact you about PCN as this is why you gave us the information when you first joined.

We have a data privacy notice on the website that sets out the situation in greater detail. The important things to note are that we will only use your information for the following reasons:

- To administer membership records;
- To fundraise and promote the interests of the charity;
- To communicate with our employees and volunteers;
- To maintain our own accounts and records (including the processing of gift aid applications);
- To inform you of news, events and activities of PCN, and to send you copies of our magazine, Progressive Voices;
- To inform you of events hosted by partner organisations that conform to PCN's eight points.

We may contact you about partner organisations but we will never give your information to another organisation without your consent. If we did ever need to pass your information on, you would be contacted and would have the right to say no; the GDPR means that unless you specifically say yes, we are not allowed to pass it on.

The GDPR not only places new responsibilities on organisations but it gives you greater control over your information. You now have the right to request a copy of the information that we hold about you, you may request that any inaccuracies are corrected, you may request that your information is deleted when it is no longer needed, you have the right to withdraw your permission for us to use your information, and you have the right to object to how we use your information.

Our Data Privacy Notice is available on the website to view www.pcnbritain.org.uk/about/data_privacy_notice if you do not have access to the internet please contact me at the office (sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk or 01594 516528) and I will send you a copy.

If you have any questions about this please get in touch and I will do my best to help.

In Search of Soul

'When we devote no time to the inner life, we lose the habit of soul... The deeper questions about who we are and what we are here for visit us less and less. If we allow time for soul, we will come to sense its dark and luminous depth. If we fail to acquaint ourselves with soul, we will remain strangers in our own lives.'

John O'Donohue

In 1993, the psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, published a book entitled 'Modern Man in Search of a Soul' in which he outlined what he saw as 'the spiritual problem of modern man'. For Jung, the key problem facing modern man is 'a loss of soul'. We are, he claimed, profoundly disconnected from our innermost self, our 'true personality' as he described it. Some eighty years later, the Catholic priest and philosopher, John O'Donohue, once described as 'a man of the soul', made a similar diagnosis. We have, he said, lost 'the habit of soul'. We spend so little time attending to soul, listening for that quiet voice that speaks to us from the very core of our being, heeding its wisdom, responding to its sacred call that we have 'managed to inflict severe surgery on ourselves'.

I believe this to be true also of much of Western religion. We have become so preoccupied with questions about what to believe, about whose truth is the right truth, about who to include and who to exclude that those deeper existential questions that O'Donohue spoke of have gradually receded from our hearts and minds. The inner journey has become 'a road less travelled' to draw on Scott Peck's analogy. We have forgotten that the spiritual journey is not just a journey into the sacred mystery that is the Divine but also into the sacred mystery of our own souls. The two journeys are intricately interwoven. Each is as important as the other. Each enhances the other. And neither can be neglected if we are to respond fully to our deepest calling as human beings.

This is something philosophers, theologians, sages, mystics and poets across the world have known for centuries. The call to 'know thyself' emerged well over 2000 years ago in different cultures and traditions, both in the East and West and since then, many have sought to alert us to the importance of seeking what the Christian theologian, John Calvin called 'a deep knowing of self'. There is a strong thread of ancient Eastern wisdom concerning the knowing of self that stretches at least as far back as the writing of the ancient Hindu Scriptures known as the Upanishads around 800 to 500 BCE. In this collection of ancient religious and philosophical writings, knowing or 'realising' the Self was presented as the ultimate goal of life and as the pathway to immortality. Centuries later, ancient Hindu sages and poets echoed this in their writings. In the Bhagavad Gita, for example, seeking the Self is seen as the source of

true knowledge and 'the true end of wisdom always'. A similar emphasis can also be found in the later writings of the Chinese philosophers and wisdom teachers Confucius and Lao-Tzu and of Gautama Buddha in north-eastern India.

In the context of the Christian faith, the interdependence of knowing self and God has also been recognised since the earliest days of the church. We see this, for example, in the writings of Augustine of Hippo, the 4th century Christian theologian, who echoed this call to 'know thyself'. Augustine spoke of the way of 'interiority' – a turning away from the outer world to the inner self. He acknowledged the importance for his spirituality of entering 'my own depths' and came to believe that 'A person must first be restored to himself, that making of himself as it were a stepping stone. He may then rise to God.' For Augustine, then, self-knowledge was a crucial first step in seeking knowledge of God.

This early insight has been echoed many times across the centuries – for example, by Meister Eckhart, the 13th to 14th century German theologian and mystic who maintained that 'No one has known God who has not known himself' and urged us to 'Go into your own ground and learn to know yourself there'; by the 15th century Dutch priest, Thomas à Kempis who believed that 'a humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning'; by the 16th century Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun, Teresa of Avila who asserted that virtually all of the problems we encounter in the spiritual life stem from lack of self-knowledge; by the 16th century protestant theologian, John Calvin who argued that, 'There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God'; and more recently, by the 20th century Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton who came to believe that, 'If I find God I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find God. It is an insight that is also to be found in the writings of many well-known 21st century Christian writers such as Maria Harris, Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr and Joyce Rupp to name but a few. This is clearly a calling that has never subsided.

As I see it, however, the 'long journey into yourself' that the 13th century mystic, Rumi spoke of is not just one of coming to a deep knowing of the self, but one of becoming and being that self. It is not only a process of self-discovery. It is not only about developing our awareness and understanding of self. It is a deep transformational knowing. It is about awakening to and birthing the self that is the very core of our being. Some might call this the True Self. Others might call it the soul. Whatever language we might use, however, what we are talking about is that which is innermost within us, the essence of who we are, the sacred centre of our being.

'Listening' the soul 'into disclosure and discovery' is, as the Quaker philosopher, Douglas Steere put it, one of the greatest gifts we can ever give each other. Perhaps teaching people how to live soulfully is one of the greatest gifts the church could ever give them.



Kaitlyn Steele is a psychologist, therapist, spiritual director, teacher, and author of 'Sacred Space: Embracing the spiritual in person-centred therapy.'

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Soulsong

When I lay down the myriad masks I wear
and soul comes naked to the eye,
who am I?

When harsher voices in my head are stilled
and I can heed the song of soul,
who am I?

When I look deeper than the eye can see
and glimpse the landscape of my being,
who am I?

When I set loose the wildness of the heart
and let it bear me where it will,
who am I?

When I dance freedom underneath the stars
and chant my hymn to sister moon,
who am I?

When I walk bare of foot at water's edge
and universe and I are one,
who am I?

When I float light as feather on the wind
and womanspirit rises up,
who am I?

When I hold breath and wait for what will be
and feel the More in every vein,
who am I?

Kaitlyn Steele

Compassion

Online Dialogue Course

An Online Course in Critical Thinking and Creative
Compassion to Create Deep Dialogue



**CHARTER FOR
COMPASSION**

This course intends to meet a great challenge: to empower people to live in society with genuine respect and mutual care for self and others. Human relations break down when worlds collide. Violence and abuse arise in ethnic conflicts, racial hatred, gender issues, ideological confrontations, and ecological indifference. This course teaches content and skills that help transform these challenges into opportunities for a deepened sense of one's own worldview and an awakened awareness of the worldviews of others who share a different worldview from one's own.

**DIALOGUE
INSTITUTE**



**JOURNAL OF
ECUMENICAL STUDIES**

Religion is the particular lens used here, with an assumption that values and ideologies can function in a person's life as does a religion, even if someone isn't particularly or at all religious. At the end of this self-paced course, one will be able to meet the following objectives:

- Define dialogue, and apply it to one's daily life.
- Use critical thinking about an issue of importance.
- Demonstrate increased knowledge of one's own worldview and that of another person.
- Recognize the difference between a stereotype and a generalization and learn to deconstruct a stereotype to defuse prejudice and construct useful, respectful generalizations.
- Act with creativity and compassion.

<https://charterforcompassion.org/online-dialogue-course>

**"Peace demands the most heroic labour
and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands
greater heroism than war. It demands
greater fidelity to the truth and a much
more perfect purity of conscience."**

Thomas Merton

News from local groups

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

Abingdon

Cliff Marshall

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Recently we have been following on from a great open evening in the company of Dave Tomlinson. About 60 people enjoyed a stimulating talk which prompted us to think about how we might enable our churches to be accepting of, and attractive to, the black sheep and prodigals of Christianity. A really positive outcome was the opportunity to meet several prospective new group members. In Apr and May we began to look at the way liturgy might be made more intelligible to the outsider. We shall continue this theme on 5 Jun and will explore some more progressive liturgies for gatherings. On 3 Jul, we shall welcome back Gary Collins who will share with us the approach he takes, as a progressive member of the clergy, in making church meaningful for the non-traditionalists. All our meetings in the coming months will be at St Michael's Church Room, Park Road, Abingdon, OX14 1DU.

Billingshurst

Stuart Coupe

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We are a small group meeting monthly. We have participants from a range of landscapes: Unitarian, United Reformed, Quaker, C of E. We have been meeting for the past 18 months or so.

We always begin sessions with a period of contemplation, usually centred around a biblical passage and this often generates a discussion as we talk about our individual responses to the text.

Following this, we use often YouTube videos of talks and lectures as a stimulus for further thought and discussion. Sometimes we all make a contribution to a themed evening, for example bringing along objects or text that hold meaning for us

along our faith journey.

The most important aspect of our meeting is the sense of fellowship that we engender. As somebody once said: "we need not think alike, to love alike."

Bolton

Jim Hollyman

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Having concluded our thinking about "The Historical Jesus", we will consider on 13 Jun, a recent essay by Fred C Plumer, "What is God?" Then, beginning on 11 July, we will be sharing thoughts prompted by reading Conrad Gempf's book "Jesus Asked". The chapter titles attracted us: Always asking questions; Constantly speaking in riddles; Questions easily answered; Ducking questions with Questions; Questions that cut to the Centre; Rebuke by questions; Questions with no obvious answers; Jesus Pretends; How not to answer Jesus' Questions; and What Jesus wanted to know. We meet at 1.30pm each second Wed, and finish by 3pm.

Chesterfield

John Simmonds

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We have been meeting most months for quite a long time. Initiated by John Simmonds, and stemming from St Mark's in Sheffield, we are people who live partly in Chesterfield but also drawn from quite a radius. Wath on Dearne to the north east, Buxton to the North west and Wirksworth to the south west, and one person from Sheffield are added to 8 locals. We move round each other's houses, and we lead in turn, with the host usually leading. We have been through some of the Borg/Crossan and British PCN material, but have recently been tackling 'The Case for God' by Karen Armstrong – which we have found fairly tough. When Adrian Alker visits us in June, we will have got to 'Atheism'! One or two of us are regularly at St Marks for CRC events and Frances is a member of the church.

Edinburgh

Mary McMahon

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This year we have been focussing on the inward journey of faith. In Jan, Scott McKenna explored 'the longest journey in life' - an informative presentation - which was followed by a lively and engaged discussion both in groups and in plenary. In Feb we shared 'Thoughts for the Day', and in Mar, Mary McMahon used James Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' as a means of recognising development and progress along the Way. In Mar, Clyne Shepherd challenged us on the topic of 'Spirituality' with questions to help us focus on what we understand to be at the heart of faith. Our next topic is 'Saving the Baby!' which is likely to continue the conversations we have been having in recent months.

Our well-established monthly coffee mornings at a bistro near the canal, continue to add an important space for sharing, caring and fun! There is always 'a welcome on the mat!'

Manchester

John Ramsbottom

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We continued to meet during the spring, with a varied programme of material and continuing in the main with sessions led by our members. This included an evening exploring the ancient spiritual practice of walking the labyrinth, albeit in a rather cold church! The sudden spell of wintry weather put paid to the Feb meeting but we were pleased in Mar to welcome Dave Tomlinson who gave an interesting talk at a well-attended evening held jointly with Grove Lane Baptist Church. Quite a few people also came along to find out about being "bitten by a camel" when we looked at the somewhat controversial journey in faith by author Kent Dobson. Further plans are to share ideas on resources that people have found helpful in their own spiritual paths, before deciding at the final meeting of this session in Jun what we wish

to do in the autumn. There will be a break for the summer with no meetings in Jul or Aug. Meetings are generally on the 4th Wed at Heaton Moor United Church in Stockport.

Newcastle

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Pat Fuller

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On Tue 12 Jun we will meet at St Thomas the Martyr Church, Haymarket for our annual meeting to present accounts, report on activities and to plan the programme for 2018 - 2019.

On Tue 10 Jul we gather at Consett for 'Summer Conversations' - a chance to enjoy discussion around themes brought by members.

Rugby

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Nicola Phelan

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At our March meeting, inspired by Mark Oakley's book 'The Splash of Words' and an article drawn from this on poetry as soul language, a group of nine of us shared poems that had spoken to us. Gerard Manley Hopkins, Johns Milton and Betjeman, TS Elliot, Ann Lewin, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, William Henry Davies all featured. There was a strong theme of the power and peace of nature as well as relationships with other people.

Truth by Ann Lewin (featured in the book Candles and Kingfishers) is one that seems to encapsulate the PCN approach to life and faith.

The writings of Kahlil Gibran in 'The Prophet' were quoted and found to be very popular. The section on marriage had been used in couple counselling. Poems with no titles feature on the website of Manchester psychologist Steve Taylor and a poem was read. The point was made that our reaction is subjective and can change over time and so the person sharing the poem made no further comment.

The poetry and familiarity of liturgy was found to be very grounding following bereavement for one member. A Hymn by Brian Wren 'Great God your Love has called us here' was shared by another person who talked of Wren describing hymns as poetry, theology and faith

expression. This led into discussion of whether people engage with the words of hymns and whether the corporate act of worship was more important than our ability to assent to the theology that is expressed. Soul Music both sacred and secular is therefore the theme of our May meeting which is in keeping with recent discussions in PCN.

N Worcester Mary Kenchington

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In Jan we reflected on our experiences of Christmas, both positive and negative; we wondered what message is conveyed to many as yet outside the Church by some of our less than subtle nativity scenes! We re-visited what we'd learned from previous meetings in 2017 and explored some of the difficulties of pursuing a more radical agenda whilst not wanting to write 'God' out of the picture. The inverted commas are to indicate the difficulty of trying still to engage with the undefineable-by-definition. This difficulty was even more marked in our Mar meeting when we began to consider how our understanding of 'God' might be affected by the findings of modern cosmology, the latter being yet another undefinable....by enormity! We shall probably come back to that challenge in Sept, when our proposed topic is Consciousness: is consciousness the foundation of all that is, and if so how might it inform our attempts to understand, talk about, and perhaps relate to 'God'? Before that, our June meeting will offer a lighter diet, continuing to share something of our own faith-journeys, planning for the rest of the year, and simply enjoying some food and each others' company.

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth

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In Apr we had a radical look at Creeds. The negative comments outweighed the positive. Surprised? We feel the Creeds are a controlling system operated by the church establishment who created them. They exclude outsiders and do not welcome them. There is nothing

in the Apostle's Creed about the life of Jesus, particularly about social justice, nor about Christian practice. The general feeling was they are now unnecessary. In their favour, we admitted they bind congregations together, give a basic starting point for discussion with newcomers and provide something to push against rather than there being a void. Instead we would like to see a Charter which would emphasise values, purposes and intentions. We would use a positive statement of why we are Christians, what we commit to do and a declaration of discipleship for a building of relationships. We are currently planning an open evening conference to be held in Tunbridge Wells on Thurs 20 Sept. It will be led by Dr Rupert Sheldrake on the title "Science and Spiritual Practices"

Pentecost Reflection

'Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

And that is how

it needs to be so often.

Hard on the heels of momentous, often unwelcome events, those which absorb all our attention, there is a need for a time of waiting, waiting for the next stage of life to unfold, to become clear, waiting for the strength and courage to take the next steps.

Did the disciples wait patiently, confidently as they obeyed, staying in the city?

Or, like us so often,

did they chafe and question, fretting and wondering, anxious to be getting on?

Or, did they hide away, not daring even to contemplate the future?

Help us God of kept promises to be patient in the waiting times until we too are clothed with your life-giving power as we step out again on the road to the Kingdom.

Ros Murphy

Reviews

Witness To Faith Today by Pádraig Ó Tuama, Redemptorist Publications



This CD is part of a series of interviews with leading Christian thinkers and activists called 'The Hope That Is Within You'. It is accompanied by a booklet with a full transcript of the interview.

Pádraig is a published author of theological works and poetry, and leader of the Corrymeela community, a reconciliation group based in Northern Ireland that has been active since 1965. He talks extensively about the history of conflict in Northern Ireland and about the impact that has had on society and on individual families.

In this interview Pádraig talks about the challenges of leadership and the theology behind that. His understanding of the gospel texts, and what he describes as a pathway into the gospels through Ignatius of Loyola, is one of the key elements to this thinking.

In the interview he talks about the role of leadership in conflict resolution and the importance of factors such as public gesture, good policy, generosity and ideology in shaping sensitive leadership. It is punctuated with Pádraig's readings of his stirring and incisive poetry which looks at subjects such as Martin McGuinness' handshake with the Queen, violence and torture, understandings of atonement, and the difficulties that some people can find in a church that should provide sanctuary for all.

He also talks about living as a gay man and the hardships that can cause in church life. This is another aspect of the theme of conflict, reconciliation, acceptance and affirmation.

As an insight of Pádraig's work and life, this reveals a man of humility, with a determination to understand the other and to apply to his life the teachings and examples that he sees in Jesus.

Andy Long

The Heart is a Noisy Room by Ronald Boyd-Macmillan, Hodder & Stoughton

Refreshingly more like a good self-help book than a Christian treatise, I found this an intriguing and enjoyable read.

The starting point, captured in the title, is that we live as individuals in the midst of myriad 'voices', all offering us



varying and often contradictory personal narratives playing themselves out in our hearts. Few would disagree, but some would argue that the voices come from and live in our heads. The author is clear however; the messages, both positive and negative, by which we live our daily lives are of the heart and come from one of three places: 'God, the pit or ourselves', although, in reality, most come from ourselves. They may come from our past, from our environment, or from our ideas, but it is in the crucible of our hearts that we try to make sense of them.

Many of our voices are negative - leading us to self-judgment—and we probably listen most to these. Our voices also speak of busyness, aspiration and achievement. Either way, they can drown out what the author describes as the 'voice of God'. This is the voice that takes us beyond and below the contradictory messages that our hearts are giving us. This is the whisper of stillness and of our 'real self'.

Our voices will not go away, nor should we wish them to. Some of them protect us and all of them have a message for us - even if it is not the obvious one.

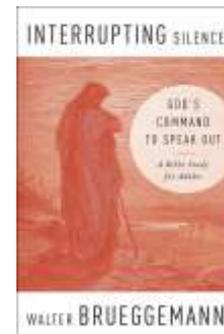
However, mediated through the 'peace of God' the author argues that this inner dialogue can bring us to a good place as we negotiate our voices. Five strategies are offered to prevent the voices from causing harm and to allow us to reach below and beyond them to an authentic relationship with our self and with God. The spiritual 'self-help' text details these steps: talk back to the voice, befriend the voice, ask God to share the burden or shrink the voice. Finally, we are advised to 'create a community of contradiction' of friends, real and symbolic, living or dead, who can support us in our struggle to defeat the negatives and find the truth.

Although the language is in many ways traditional Christian, reflecting the author's impressive history and commitment to mission, it also is interestingly open. I like his phrase '...maybe God is so everywhere it looks like He is nowhere...' and his suggestion that the voice of God is more likely to be

a whisper than the loud shout of the preacher trying to convert willy-nilly. I like his admission that maybe the voices are mostly our own and not from God or 'the pit' (!) and that in finding our own authentic self through all the babble, we are closest to being our very best and thus closest to God. This is an interesting book and I will continue to think about the ideas it raises.

Christine King

Interrupting Silence: God's Command to Speak Out by Walter Brueggemann, Hodder & Stoughton



Brueggemann has written over a hundred books. I don't pretend even to have heard of more than a dozen of them, but I have never yet found one that was not interesting and profitable to read.

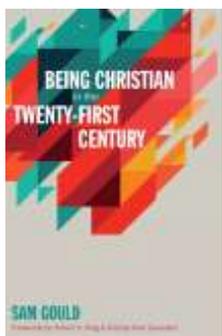
We can always expect from him a fresh and challenging interpretation of Scripture that vividly brings out its relevance to situations in our time. This book must be one of his shortest: 110 pages plus notes. Unlike many, it is addressed to people with no background in biblical criticism and history. There are notes in the text and at the end, giving outlines of the biblical history and explanations of basic terms such as 'Torah', 'YHWH', 'Israel' and 'Zion'. Each chapter introduces a fresh and provocative theme and ends with 'questions for reflection. It would be ideal for a series of group discussions. Brueggemann's main point is that those in power have a vested interest in maintaining the kind of silence in which suffering people accept their conditions as normal, inevitable and unchangeable, while the system that gives them their power presents itself as equally normal, inevitable and unchangeable. The first breaking of the silence is by those like the slaves in Egypt whose situation is so unbearable that they can no longer refrain from groaning. Then comes the persistence of the prophet, the Gentile woman arguing with Jesus, the widow pestering the judge to give her justice, the blind man refusing to be hushed up by the crowd. There is a chapter too about the life-destroying effect of silence about oneself.

With all its apparent simplicity this book raises profound theological issues. One of the questions for reflection is: 'Does God require groans in order to act?' (p22) The author talks about Jesus not always taking the initiative but responding to human insistence and (as in the case of the Gentile woman) even resisting. In another place we find the expression 'wear God out in prayer' (p89). All this raises the question of where the hope of change comes from: is it from God, from human beings, or is it a dynamic, open-ended interaction? The very concept of 'God' seems to be at stake here.

This little book raises big questions, both about our understanding of God and about our own speech and silence in the world: well worth reading, pondering, re-reading and discussing.

Ray Vincent

Being Christian in the Twenty First Century by Sam Gould, Wipf & Stock



In 100 pages, Sam Gould has put together a challenging argument for a progressive Christianity in our time, making his pitch to the members of churches as well as

pleading for priests and ministers to be more honest and courageous.

Chapters deal with "Being Christian", "Justification by Faith", "Jesus: The Fully Human One", "From Criminal to Christ", "Atonement", "Is Jesus the Only Way?", "Scripture: Word of God or Word of Man?", "God" and "Church".

Covering such large areas of belief, it is to be expected that the reader might have many questions. Gould anticipates that by providing a very detailed Bibliography, an appendix covering the historical backdrop and the politics of first century Galilee and another on the economy, public health and religious matrix of that time.

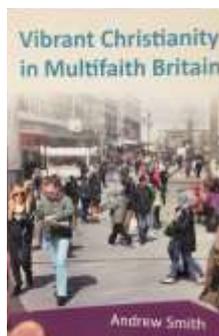
The book is written in the hope of it being used as a tool for discussion groups. There is a very detailed study guide for each chapter with an introductory essay on "The Adult Discussion Class".

Gould is an academic whose career has included leadership positions in business and government. He has also studied theology and served in administrative positions in local church settings for over 40 years. This shows in

the ways in which his writing is rooted in the reality of the present day church scene. He pays due credit to progressives like Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and Jack Spong. Sam Gould dedicates his book to his eight grandchildren "who will face their adult journey in the twenty-first century". If any of my grandchildren have any inclination for or against Christianity, I would be happy to offer this book to them to help them think through the issues. It's the sort of book I would be happy to give to anyone showing signs of a questioning faith.

Jim Hollyman

Vibrant Christianity in Multifaith Britain by Andrew Smith, BRF



BRF has produced another book from an open evangelical; PCN members will find it helpful, challenging but occasionally also irritating. Andrew Smith's experience has only been in

Britain, where as the director of interfaith relations for the bishop of Birmingham he has worked with people from Muslim, Sikh and other faiths. He rather patronisingly says 'if you're reading this [outside Britain] it's lovely that you are but you will need to reflect ... in your context.'

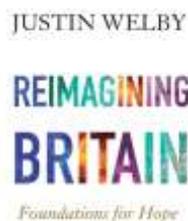
The phrase 'vibrant Christianity' in the book's title attracted me but this is not its focus; rather it is about Christian approaches to other faiths. Smith sets out to make readers aware of the different approaches we might take when meeting those of other faiths, the most important being 'to love our neighbour and then to serve them unconditionally'. But when he addresses the question 'whether people of different faiths worship the same God' his response - it 'is a topic I don't want to open up here' - makes me wish he could have been more adventurous.

The chapter on the Great Commission sets out Smith's main thesis. He describes a range of approaches to evangelism and suggests the evangelical focus on conversion is as bad a starting point as a liberal acceptance of universalism. He includes a statement of the Hindu Council of the UK that to seek to convert 'God-loving people is a sin'. Also that for Muslims the main problem is not moving to follow another faith but leaving Islam itself. Smith describes

his own response to the question from a Sikh 'do you want me to convert?': Christianity gives 'assurance of salvation' so 'I'd like that for you' but 'I'm not going to force you to convert'. This led to his questioner asking him to talk more about his faith. The author references other work on interfaith relations, including the Christian Muslim Forum. Their document, setting out ways to witness, including 'financial, material or other inducements' should never be linked with evangelism; 'we cannot convert people, only God can do that'. Smith makes an interesting suggestion about our response to 'street preachers': 'I ask them what it is in their faith that inspires them. ... I suggest we each give our answers without criticising the beliefs or practices of the other.' An approach which might be preferable to walking by on the other side. This book's thoughts on dialogue, witness and conversion will help readers to re-evaluate their own engagement with those of other faiths.

Peter Varney

Reimagining Britain: Foundations of Hope by Justin Welby, Bloomsbury Continuum



Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, provides a timely and heartfelt, if rather dull, case for looking at contemporary issues from a Christian point of view. The

argument is well-rehearsed - the Christian counter-narrative to neo-liberal wealth creation and distribution, which, for all its claims, exacerbates an already unequal society, exploits the environment, encourages greed, and puts little value on moral responsibility. The challenge this book presents is the extent to which the Church can and should speak power and policy to the state. Christians are very much on the back foot, often listened to with a kind of curious indifference.

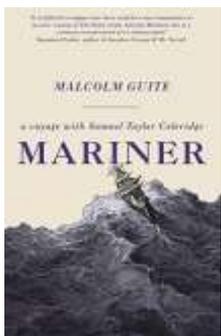
He examines three main areas: education, health, and housing, picking out how self-serving policies exclude and demonize, and how privileged elites gain at others' expense. The 'common good' predictably lies at the heart of the matter for Welby and is put at risk by a 'finance-driven society which leads to

huge distortions in wealth and social division'. For Welby, there is courage to deal with risk, sacrifice to deal with selfishness, compassion and solidarity, reconciliation and civic engagement, 'healing our brokenness', 'enhancing spiritual care'. A society that defines old age as inconvenient and argues for euthanasia, that celebrates wealth-creation and through the financial crash puts everyone's lives in jeopardy, that subscribes merely to the ideology of progress, is one that denies and corrupts 'the abundance of life' promised by the Christian faith. A zero-sum society, where 'I win, you lose' is the name of the game, is one that has its values wrong.

He eventually gets around to describing what faith communities can and actually do - get involved in debt counselling and mothers-and-toddlers groups, caring for the elderly and counselling - and things start to firm up and become tangible, and credible. But we have to wade through a lot of long abstract words (like resilience, toleration and solidarity) and tired quasi-theological terms (like sovereignty of God, abundance of life, forgiving those who fall), and any modern secularly inclined reader is bound to ask whether these cut the mustard and mean very much anymore. Welby says 'the greatest danger that faces a liberal society that is open to question is not subversion, but its own fear of challenge and contradiction'. We are then forced to admit that, for all its generalities, his case is worth making, and the case Christians make for a fairer society is still a very sound one, too often drowned out by the noise of living. He argues that we need an overarching moral narrative: if it's not going to look like an exhortation to be good little boys and girls, it needs to go much deeper than this.

Stuart Hannabuss

Mariner - A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge by Malcolm Guite, Hodder and Stoughton

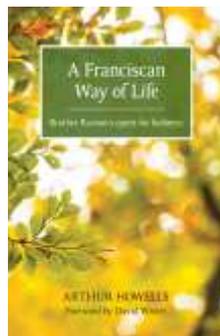


The book is an impressive piece of academic work: lengthy, scholarly, well-written and enjoyable, if not easy, to read. The author dedicates it entirely to Coleridge's poem and to exploring

the story of Coleridge's life. He writes with a personal passion, some might say obsession, with Coleridge and in particular with this poem. As an academic study this book deserves a place on many a library and personal bookshelf. The biography has a fascinating twist. Coleridge's life, Guite argues, strangely and retrospectively mirrors the life and story of his Mariner. Guite takes the interrelationship even further suggesting that the poem foreshadows not just the life of the poet but our history and times. It offers, he is clear, a tool for our spiritual journey in the post-modern age. He works past the image of Coleridge as a drug fuelled Romantic poet, making grandiose claims for his work. He knows Coleridge as the Christian mystic, seeing in his life and in the works from his imagination the power of his God. I am glad to have read this book, and, again, Coleridge's poem and to look at it in a new light. I have no doubt that for the author it offers a bright shining light of spiritual experience and growth. Neither the poem nor Coleridge offers this to me but they may well to others. Herein lies the joy and the challenge of mystery and mysticism and I continue to ponder its place in a progressive view of faith and spirituality.

Christine King

A Franciscan way of Life by Arthur Howells, BRF



This provides a comprehensive account of the life and work of the Franciscan Brother Ramon. It includes an anthology of his writings and a summary of his career. Many recent BRF

publications have been by evangelical writers but this one comes closer to what interests PCN members. Ramon's career started in Welsh Baptist chapels; he had a charismatic experience, and then discovered Anglo Catholic worship and the Franciscans. This multifaceted identity is shown in his writings. Howells arranges these in sections covering pilgrimage and journey, prayer and meditation, and living in the world. All provide readers with points for further exploration. It is always my hope that spiritual writers will offer help in understanding the meaning of the cross. Ramon does

not disappoint when he writes: 'The crucified Christ is also the risen Christ ... the cross is the tree of life, the thorn-crowned saviour is the King of Glory reigning from his throne.' His discussion of intercessory prayer, another question for many of us, may also be found helpful: 'Prayer is communion with God; this is much wider and deeper than petition or intercession. ...Our prayer is the prayer of the cosmic Christ ... within the communion of saints [and] it contributes to an increase of hope, light and love in the world.'

The book's biographical section identifies unexpected events in Ramon's search for holiness as a hermit, and his later acceptance of the cancer which forced him back into Community at Glasshampton. Here he worked for a week, in continuous pain, with Bishop Simon Barrington Ward on a book on the Jesus prayer. After that 'week of glory' - as they called it - Ramon became much weaker. Bishop Simon returned to find him on his deathbed and reported 'I have never come away from a deathbed actually feeling exhilarated as I did then, despite the sharp sense of loss.'

Howells summarises Ramon's life as a journey of discovery, transformation and transfiguration. His hours spent in prayer drew him close to God. His holiness did not separate him from people but drew him to them. He saw in all a spark of the divine. This is a book that will gently challenge its readers to go deeper into their own relationship with the divine.

Peter Varney

4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers, The Youth Cartel



This is the first in a proposed series of books presenting different views on contemporary topics. Each author presents their thoughts in an individual chapter, which is then responded to by

one of the other authors. Don't pick up this book expecting a unified view on the subject matter. Whilst it is apparent that each of the authors has a passionate and caring heart for young people who are exploring their sexuality, it is equally clear that they don't always agree with each other's position. Their responses

to each other are compassionate, thoughtful and well presented – most of the time. They each have a clear view of their own thoughts and debate strongly with each other, at times it turns into a bit of a bun fight as each seeks to examine their writing partner's thoughts in the light of their own views and experience. I suppose that is what this book, and this series of books, is all about. LGBTQ teenagers need loving, caring, thoughtful pastoral care and each author has their own ideas about that.

Each author comes from a different background and brings their own personal understandings and religious background to the game. Three of the authors are American, whilst Gemma Dunning, a London based Baptist minister, is the sole UK representative. Liberal and (marginally) conservative views are represented. Three have a holistically inclusive viewpoint and, in sometimes differing ways, want to support and accept all young people into adulthood, whatever their gender identity or sexual orientation. One author takes the view that ultimately sexuality can be 'remade' - a position that many readers will find distasteful to say the least, but at least his position is represented here.

Editor Mark Ostreicher sums up with final thoughts and some useful appendices that provide practical advice and resources. The book as a whole is at times inspiring and at other times exasperating. You, as a reader, will inevitably find material here that is helpful and supportive, alongside some that is frustrating, but on the whole, it is a book that will promote debate and discussion within churches, among youth leaders, pastors and counsellors, and this debate can only be healthy and promote a deeper understanding.

Andy Long

Christmas, Myth, Magic and Legend by John Queripel, Wipf & Stock



'A myth is not a lie.' With that introduction, John Queripel captured my interest and held it to his last words. And his last words are good to read... 'We are not to pretend that the stories are history

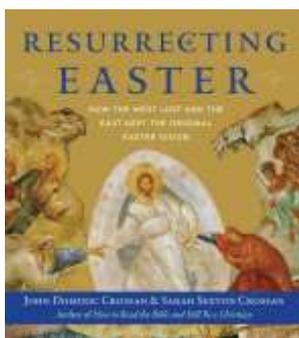
but rather to enter the experience and be transformed by them.' I can think of

no better way to be transformed than to use this book as a guide. John's forensic skills have produced a classic critical analysis of the Christmas narratives, unpacking the true meaning of Christmas, and bringing into focus the powerful symbolic and metaphorical teaching. At the same time, he has dismantled a huge amount of overly simplistic thinking by sourcing the forces that have shaped and politicized the gospel writers. John helps us to see past our Western scientific mindset, profoundly shaped by Aristotelian logic of factual, objective and verifiable truth. Highly recommended. Very transformative and loaded with brain stimulation and fabulous thinking.

Paul Inglis

Resurrecting Easter by John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Crossan, HarperOne

This beautifully illustrated book is a mix of biblical engagement, history, theology, travelogue, and most importantly art. Working together collaboratively husband and wife, John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan draw together a book that



builds on their individual strengths, words and images, to share the wisdom they have unearthed through 15

years and 20 trips around the Mediterranean and Europe. They introduce and compare two visions of Christ's Resurrection, an event for which there is no direct description in the Bible. There are two indirect tellings which broadly fall into the empty-tomb and risen-vision traditions, and they open up to us the visual theology of direct images which show an individual tradition (beginning in 400CE, and held by the Western Church) and the universal tradition (beginning in 700CE, and held by the Eastern Church). This is an absorbing journey which is revelatory, and shines renewed light on this most central event of Christian tradition to offer hope and promise for all (past, present and future).

David Coaker



News from the Trustees

Currently, as ever, there are a number of items being considered by the trustees. We continue to give thought to the hopeful production of short films about progressive Christianity. We are in discussion with a former BBC producer and have applied for some grant aid to support what would be a costly but worthwhile piece of work.

We constantly try to plan ahead with a programme of conferences and other events. The Marcus Borg Memorial Conference will be graced this year by our speaker Marianne Borg. The gathering will take place at St Marks Sheffield on the weekend of October 19/21 and more details will be available soon.

We also hope we can encourage groups to stage regional workshops on hymns, following the success of the AGM venture.

Having recently appointed Janis as our Social Media Editor, the trustees want to encourage all our members to see social media as a vital part of our communications.

Our website is undergoing more improvements which members will see soon. However we are having to think about a successor to Andy who intends to step down from the Web Editor role this year.

PCN will have a presence at Solas again and at Greenbelt over the August Bank Holiday.

We do need members to staff the Greenbelt stall; please do let Sarah know if you can help.

At the June meeting we shall finalise our priorities and strategy for the three years up to 2020 as well as discuss conferences for 2019.

Finally we will pursue the idea of having PCN regional 'ambassadors', members who are prepared to give support to local groups and be the eyes and ears of PCN, promoting our work in their 'home' area.

Plenty to keep the trustees busy!

Adrian Alker

Psalm 42

Why are my spirits low and troubled?

Creator God,

all life yearns for the blessings you bestow.

My very being craves your presence,

God in whom I live and move

and have my being.

I feel your presence in awestruck moments,

but when will I know you beyond any doubt?

My heart breaks as I look at the world around,

others seeing only your absence.

My tears become of joy when I remember,

the times I felt you especially close,

the worship that drew us all close,

taken by the Spirit in the fullness of Love.

Why are my spirits low and troubled?

I have hope, those times will happen again,

God will draw close to me.

But my spirits remain low,

so I recall my mountain top experiences anew.

Memory falters in the face of the storms of life.

In the brightness of day, love shines.

In the silence of night,

I crave the song of prayer.

You are the ground of my being,

but why am I forgotten?

Why do I grieve?

Why do I feel misunderstood?

My life is crushed, my spirit weak,

the world declares your absence

with every breath.

Why are my spirits low and troubled?

I have hope, those times will happen again,

God will draw close to me again.

David Coaker

Psalm 36:5-10

It's like standing beneath a street lamp

On a misty evening.

In the light, I see light,

But objects appear blurry and obscured, half lit.

God, standing in your light, I see light,

But the path ahead appears blurry and obscured,
seemingly half lit.

The future, shrouded in a mist of unknowing.

Console my fear of ambiguity, of uncertainty.

Convict my spirit to persevere,

to continue in trust.

Fill the dark horizons with the abundance of your
steadfast love.

Encourage me to step into the swirling mist
of your presence.

Even into the streaming waters
of the fountain of life.

Wrapped in the precious shadow of your wings,
I will find refuge in you.

Delight shall envelop me, in the light,
in the darkness

In the misty evening.

Ana Gobledale