

Progressive Voices



June 2020, PV33

Transition and Transformation

These thoughts began as a response to reading Nick Vesey's 'Living the Life-Force' (Ozark Mountain Publishing, 2019) about the way the world's religions all suggest we need a place of waiting, a place where we accept and go with the flow of life.

Lao Tzu asks:

*Do you have the patience to wait
Till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
Till the right action arises by itself?*

This time of 'lockdown' is one of transition. People around the world I link with on Facebook are, like us, discovering how to use this time. We are not so much stuck in one place, but expanding our consciousness on the way to something we hope will change us, and make us more wholly human.

This time of transition provides an opportunity to take up and explore more deeply things I've too often postponed. For me it's a time to live a little more adventurously; my response has been to take up new ways of painting. I've spent several days using water-soluble oil paints, and am happy with discovering what they can do.

The process of putting down a line or shape, of mixing colours, is spontaneous, not planned; a time when I can 'wait', as Lao Tzu suggests, and be totally absorbed in the task. In this way it can be a place where the Spirit flows through the painter. After an initial stage a 'right action' in the form of a response to what has been painted suggests what might work better – perhaps a different colour or shape. This happened while painting this image of the Brecon Beacons (below); it provided an opportunity to include a 'bright field'.

I'm trying to make space during this period of 'lockdown' to give time for creativity. I hope, when I look back to it, it will have been a time of transition; towards what so many are beginning to express may be a future time of transformation for the entire world.

Transformation for me must include a new direction embracing more passionate living. We may hope the world and its leaders may also be transformed, that we may live with more consciousness of each other and of all of creation?

Peter Varney



Contents

- 2 Transition and Transformation
- 3 Welcome; Staff & Trustees; Membership
- 4 Chair's Letter;
- 5 ... of what spirit; Don't hold on ...
- 6 Lockdown Thoughts
- 7 Religious, but not Spiritual
- 8 What can we believe about Jesus? #3
- 9 Poem: Corona Virus
- 10 Let's hear it for Judas
- 11 God's Paradoxical World
- 12 We Are Shadows
- 14 A Darker Pilgrimage
- 15 Poems: Sanctuary, Eternal Life
- 16 News from local groups; In Memoriam
- 18 Reviews: A God Beyond Belief, The Journey to the Mayflower, Heaven and Hell, Making the Most of Retirement, Thief Prisoner Soldier Priest, What's in the Bible (for Me)?, Outgrowing God, Buddhism and God, Liza's Avenger, Franciscan Footprints, Quiet Courage of the Inner Light, On Priesthood, We need to talk about Africa
- 21 Solitude Shorts
- 22 Accord Coalition
- 23 Reflection: Psalm 23
- 24 Rainbow: Covid-19

 **THE EQUALITY TRUST**
Because more equal societies work better for everyone
www.equalitytrust.org.uk

MEMBERSHIP

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

£30 (£15 for limited income)

Receive 4 copies of PV each year, advance notice of events, reduced event fees, along with support and encouragement.

01594 516528

www.pcnbritain.org.uk/membership

Welcome

We live in interesting times. As you may have guessed from the cover, Covid-19 has had an impact on PV. We were initially contemplating a pdf only version, but luckily our printer came through for us.

We offer some reflections on where we're at, follow-up on some items from PV32, a reflection from an autistic progressive Christian, encouragement to embrace life, an introduction to Accord, poems and reflections, updates from our groups and how they are keeping in touch with each other, plenty of book reviews, but no event details - unsurprisingly!

Welcome to the 33rd edition of PV.

Enjoy!

Dave Coaker



**CHARTER FOR
COMPASSION**

charterforcompassion.org

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

Publication is at the editor's discretion:
dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Copy Deadlines:

Sept: Friday 10th July

Dec: Friday 6th Nov 2020

March: Friday 22nd Jan 2021

June: Friday 30th April 2021

Progressive Voices is the magazine of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain

[Registered Charity No. 1102164].

It is published quarterly in March, June, September and December.

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

You can contact us at 01594 516528, info@pcnbritain.org.uk, or

PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB.

Further information, including details of publications and conferences:

www.pcnbritain.org.uk



Progressive Christianity Network Britain

www.pcnbritain.org.uk

www.facebook.com/pcnuk/

Trustees

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

Martin Bassant
martin.bassant@pcnbritain.org.uk

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

Simon Cross
simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk

Ian Geere
ian.geere@pcnbritain.org.uk

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

Sue Hobley
sue.hobley@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jenny Jacobs
jenny.jacobs@pcnbritain.org.uk

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

Tony Sanchez
tony.sanchez@pcnbritain.org.uk

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

Mo Wills
mo.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

Staff

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

Pete Eveleigh, Web host

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

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

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



Chair's Letter

I could never have imagined when I wrote my last Chair's letter for the March edition of PV how suddenly life would change for us all. Our organisation was looking forward to the launch of our short films at the AGM, to an exciting conference on science and religion in York, and further ahead to our presence at Greenbelt and the autumn Marcus Borg conference in Birmingham. So much has had to be cancelled and now any forward planning is cast into doubt and confusion. Yet disappointments for us in PCN are nothing compared to the devastation wrought by this deadly virus upon families, upon businesses, upon developing countries: in short both upon our individual mental and physical health and the well-being of our country and nations across the world.

I see PCN as a family of people across Britain, connected online, in gatherings and through personal relationships. We have an older demographic in the main and therefore there will be many of our members and their families concerned about their vulnerability to this disease. I am anxious about my 103-year-old mother in a care home. Many of you will have similar concerns about family members, those in care or those who work in health settings. Anxiety about meeting together in groups or at conferences will be with us for some time. However, this is also a time when I am thankful for the warmth of the PCN family alongside my other friends and support networks, and I hope you feel the same. Our special weekly newsletter has been much appreciated and prompted responses in the form of submitted poems, reflections, stories and so forth. I have been touched by phone calls from members and I want to say that if any PCN member would like simply to have a conversation by phone or email – about anything! – please feel able to get in touch with any of the trustees, whose emails you will find in this PV. I am happy for you to ring me on my mobile – 07595 249791.

But what of the future? In our small PCN world, let's hope that by the second half of the year and into 2021 we can pick up where we left off, with our films, our conferences, and our group meetings. But more importantly still, what kind of a post-Covid-19 world, what kind of a country, will emerge after this pandemic is behind us? Might it be a society which values health and care workers more than hedge fund managers? Might we come to understand afresh the great contributions made by immigrant workers to many sectors of our economy? Might we value once more having neighbours who really care for us and recapture the importance of community endeavour? As the economy is rebuilt, might we see the crass stupidity of spending billions on nuclear weaponry when we need to spend that

Christianity is about "the dream of God," God's passion for a transformed world here and now. The world matters to God: the world of nature, for God loves the whole of creation, and the humanly created world, that is, whether its systems of politics, economics, and convention are just or unjust, fair or unfair, violent or nonviolent. God's passion is compassion – in our personal lives and also in our role in shaping the world. Christians are called to participate in God's passion for a different kind of world, a world of justice and peace.

- Marcus J. Borg "Speaking Christian"

money on our health care systems? Could the cost of Trident have saved the lives of millions across the world who will be killed by this virus? As our carbon footprint has diminished through a lockdown and the world has, for a short time, breathed fresher air, can we be jolted into a sharper response to the current destruction of our environment?

What have we learnt about the contributions which faith communities have made in this time of crisis? Many have become centres for foodbanks or communal hubs organising volunteers to help in all kinds of tasks. New online worship communities have come into existence and more people have been engaged in religious activity and theological discussion than before. In the long term the outcomes may prompt us all to reflect upon what really matters in our lives – the values of care and compassion, the deep instincts of love for family and friends, an awareness of our global responsibilities. If we can recapture a Christianity which has at its heart the inclusive love and compassion of Christ, an openness to the world and its challenges, an honesty about our place in the natural world, an admission that so often we search for answers and yet are dissatisfied with glib pronouncements, then we might just see some blessings from this time of curses.

Marcus Borg often talked of the Dream of God for God's world. At the moment we are living through a nightmare but can we hold out for that Dream of a world where justice, fairness and indiscriminate love guide our feet into the way of peace? Might we then have a conversation about the meaning of Goodness, of 'God'?

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



... of what spirit

As I approach my eightieth birthday, my wife Maria and I are self-isolating due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Having three of the 'at risk'



health issues, I need to be careful not to catch any nasties. We have lovely neighbours, a young couple; he is Polish and she is Brazilian. They happily do our shopping when they do their own. Other friends also help. There is a really caring spirit, and I have no idea what their beliefs are in terms of religion or non-religion.

Those who work for the NHS and caring professions are also a really mixed bunch. My observation is that most people are responding to this pandemic out of a basic human instinct, irrespective of their beliefs. The universality of the response is somewhat similar to that towards the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004.

This week, I joined in the initial Initiatives of Change (IoC) International, (<https://uk.iofc.org/>) online Zoom meetings and was inspired to be able to have contact with such a variety of friends on different continents, also many people I didn't know. This also represented a wonderful diversity of people - of nationality, culture, religion and experience of life! I asked myself what it is that brings such an amazing mixture of people together in common cause.

In the Zoom discussion, one person, from a different continent and culture to my own, said of IoC, 'We all believe in God.' This may be true from her perspective. But living in Europe, I sense that for most people, the factor behind our solidarity in facing Covid-19 lies elsewhere. Rather than being about beliefs, it concerns responding to an innate spirit in our human hearts, wherever we may believe that spirit originates.

As Russian philosopher Grigory Pomerants, the 2008 Caux lecturer, said: 'We do not ask of what belief you are, but of what spirit.' Somehow, for most people, this present pandemic seems to be manifesting that spirit.



Howard Grace is a member of the Newbury PCN group, he is a teacher, and executive producer of the film 'Beyond Forgiving'.

Don't hold on ...

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them ...". John 20:17 (NRSV)

We live in strange times when the greatest act of love we can show to our families and communities is not to touch them. To reduce the risk of the spread of a potentially deadly disease, we are all asked to socially distance, not to touch each other in order to protect one another.

Covid-19 is cruel. Families are feeling the pain of not being able to share hugs between the generations. Those in hospital cannot easily be visited by their loved ones – if at all. People in care homes are in lockdown – no visitors allowed. Nurses do their best to assure us that no-one dies alone. When people who have recovered from Covid-19 leave hospital the first thing we see is a huge hug from their nearest and dearest.

How painful would it have been for Mary to hear Christ say, 'Don't hold on to me'? She had experienced the trauma of seeing her friend and teacher be tortured, killed and buried. It would have been the most human of instincts to reach out and touch, to want to hold on to him, to stop him from disappearing again.

However, Christ could see the bigger picture. His new life and new beginning was not something to be pinned down and contained. It was NOT for one person, in one place, at one time. His life, his love, his new beginning was to be a blessing for all people, in all places for all times. Mary's most loving action must be to let go and tell the others.

Jesus cry on the cross of, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me' is from Psalm 22. It goes on to dream of a time of equity, justice and prosperity for all finishing with a hopeful shout of praise – 'he has done it'. Could that be what Jesus meant when he said, 'It is finished'?

Strange and painful as these times are there is also a sense of hope. Hope that the world will learn the lessons of the lockdown, that life will not go back to how things were but that a time of equity, justice and prosperity for all will emerge out of the tragedy.

Perhaps now is the time for not holding on; the new life, new love and new beginning must be allowed to flourish. Let's go and tell our brothers and sisters!



Meryl White is a non-stipendiary URC minister and a member of Space for Soul Bristol.

Lockdown Thoughts

My wife, Fran, and I have recently moved to Great Torrington, North Devon. We have lived in this beautiful market town, which nestles alongside the River Torridge (of Tarka the Otter fame), on three occasions before and we are delighted to be here again. It is a town small enough not to become lost in, but large enough to accommodate a wide range of community facilities. Bakeries, butchers, grocers, supermarkets abound, along with a swimming pool, sports clubs, an Arts centre, and a hardware store! And of course a sufficiency of coffee shops to be patronised (in normal times!) daily.

There are church communities too which could satisfy the most discerning disciple – almost! The parish church is a member of the ‘Forward in Faith’ movement, and thus does not recognise the ordination of women; it’s a challenge to attend, especially for us ‘progressives’. The church building however has a sinister connection with the notion of ‘lock down’. During the English Civil War (1642-1651) during the ‘Battle of Great Torrington’, some 300 prisoners were ‘locked down’ inside, along with a store of 70 barrels of gunpowder. And yes, it happened, a stray spark caused a massive explosion killing all the prisoners and destroying the church building. A massive bonfire display is now held every two years to commemorate this event, the proceeds of which fund numerous charitable causes in Great Torrington.

An explosion of much greater import is now in our midst as the Covid-19 virus drives itself into the fabric of our society; ‘lock down’ and ‘lock in’ are with us once more, both here and throughout the world. It is clear to me that those working above and beyond ‘the norm’ on all the ‘front-lines’ are simply ‘awesome’ as my 13-year-old granddaughter describes them. Indeed, everyone who is going that extra mile (or two!), delivering to our front doors: post, food and medical supplies; ‘keeping the lights on’; or simply ‘being there’ for us merits the badge of ‘awesomeness’.

In these strange times which are so unlike the battles of the 17th century, where the enemy is both far from our sight and yet so dangerously close to our skin, we need to adjust to living with uncertainty; a state of mind which will be our companion for months to come.

The ‘Captain Tom’ generation could identify the enemy, but in this Covid-19 scenario, we cannot and the changes that are needed to accommodate are shuddering. Plans, schemes and ambitions have to be abandoned almost daily; as a result, living with change is inevitable for us all. As Richard Holloway quotes in his book: ‘Waiting for the Last Bus’ - “Nothing, it has been said, is true, but change.”



Harry Mitchell / CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rothern_Bridge_Great_Torrington_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rothern_Bridge_Great_Torrington_(3).jpg)

Agencies which bring death and disorientation upon the ‘worlds’ within which we live and have our being are never easy to comprehend or confront. And yet, in the perversity of these times we are experiencing aspects of love, care and self-giving on a scale not experienced previously in peace time; surely our hand-clapping on Thursday evenings is evidence of that aspect of our humanity, that appreciation of the ‘giving ourselves away for the sake of others’.

The adaptations and re-negotiations of everyday living will be with us as common humanity for a significant time to come. Different perspectives will be sought and lived out. Yes, we will be living through the processes of severe loss, which for so many thousands of people will be personal and agonising; for many the losses will be inconsolable. But, there will be a future.

I dare to hope that a realistic appraisal of biblical literalism will prevail for future generations as they seek a ‘beyond-ness’ in their lives. The Easter story is one such. Implicit in the biblical narrative is resurrection and that notion must prevail over and above the literalism which endeavours to hold the story together. The notion of God as a verb and not a noun, can open up a new horizon for spirituality and the re-consideration of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

History and geography are often aspects that fix our lives and when we find ourselves stranded in a time and a space of discomfort, I’m thankful for the huge swathe of people who are enjoined to bring sustenance and comfort to so many; they are, each and every one, people of blessings and change-makers all.



Ian Lovett is a former healthcare chaplain, vicar and science teacher; committed to looking for the good in all things.

Religious, but not Spiritual

The link between Autism and progressive Christianity

If I had to encapsulate my religious outlook in one sentence, I would invert the oft-cited phrase 'spiritual, but not religious' and instead say I am 'religious, but not spiritual'. I have always had a deep-seated interest in religion, and I love the traditions, community and way of life which Christianity provides. Yet I have always struggled with the supernatural aspects of the faith; I could never grasp the concept of communicating with a God 'up there' while humans were 'down here'. I bounced from church to church, all over the theological spectrum, hoping to finally achieve the 'personal relationship with Jesus' everyone else seemed to enjoy. My search eventually led me to attend theological college, where faith tends to either strengthen or die.

For my final year dissertation, I chose to research the experience of autistic adults within the Christian church; I received my autism diagnosis at the age of 18, yet I had never considered how that could influence my theology. Too often, theology regarding marginalised groups focuses on how to pull these groups into the ecclesiastical fold, enforcing conformity to theological norms. The liberation theologians of the twentieth century had a different understanding: theology should come from the margins, by listening to diverse perspectives and receiving new theological understandings beyond the established norm.

My research revealed that I am not a hopeless heretic in a state of wilful rebellion. Instead, there are neurobiological reasons which explain why autistic people struggle to give intellectual assent to supernatural doctrines. Multiple research papers have demonstrated a connection between autism and a rejection of classical theism (Heywood and Bering, 2010; Caldwell-Harris, 2011; Hutson, 2012); in order to properly relate to a personal deity, one must be able to empathise with God's personality traits, thoughts, moods, and ways of communicating. Autistic people have a hard enough time doing this with someone who is standing in front of them, let alone with an entity we cannot see. To quote John Shelby Spong, "What the mind cannot accept, the heart can finally never adore".

Society is ordered around ideas of normativity, whereby those who do not meet the norm are viewed as defective. Churches can subconsciously buy into these ideas if the goal is to make autistic people more neurotypical in behaviour and belief. How, then, can an autistic person remain part of a faith community without having to force themselves into a way of thinking that is fundamentally



incompatible with the way they experience the world?

As an autistic Christian, I have a deep desire to be part of something beyond myself, to follow the teachings of Jesus and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. I may not be able to communicate with an anthropomorphised God, but this I know: God is love, and autistic people are just as capable of giving and receiving love as anyone else. Many autistic adults face a life of isolation and misunderstanding; progressive churches can offer a community of inclusive love for such individuals.

Personally, I have found the progressive Christian tradition to be most accepting of mavericks like me. One could draw an interesting comparison between the treatment of autistic people and LGBT+ people in the church. Many progressive denominations have amended their attitudes to LGBT+ people, no longer viewing them as a problem to be solved, but instead extending a Gospel of welcome and accepting them without caveat or condition. Likewise, churches should be prepared to challenge their preconceived ideas regarding autism and learn to accept adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder into the church community as they are.

It must be noted that I do not speak on behalf of all autistic Christians. Autism is a heterogeneous disorder, meaning every autistic adult presents differently, and therefore the extent to which they struggle to conceptualise a personal deity will vary.

I finish with a quote from a local priest: "I'd rather be an 'unbelieving Christian' living by faith than an 'unloving Christian' living by beliefs".



Erin Burnett is a Ship Welfare Visitor with the Mission to Seafarers, and a graduate of Union Theological College, Northern Ireland.

What can we believe about Jesus?

The third of a four part series, which began with the stories of Jesus' birth and his public ministry, now continues with the resurrection and will then conclude reflecting on the Christ of Faith.

The resurrection

What about the resurrection?

For his followers, Jesus' death must have been a disaster and what seems to have changed them was the resurrection. But what actually happened to bring about that belief?

The New Testament says two things. First, the tomb was empty and second, the appearances confirmed he had indeed conquered death. Seeing these two assertions as historically accurate has been the faith of many Christian people since the very earliest days including a former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, who says it was only the combination of these two as actual historical facts that could account for the subsequent establishment and growth of the church.

But there has been great debate amongst biblical scholars about both, and there are some genuine questions raised by a careful examination of the New Testament itself, questions I have always believed the church should be open about, and which should not be simply confined to discussion in some academic closet.

Take the tradition of the empty tomb. The earliest evidence comes from Paul's letters, written some years before the gospels were written. In particular Paul was the only actual observer of the risen Christ whose own account appears in the New Testament itself. In 1 Corinthians he says that Jesus died and was buried, and then gives a list of various people to whom Christ appeared, but he says nothing about the nature of those appearances and when he describes the one to him it is surprisingly brief: 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.' In his letter to the Galatians it is even briefer: God 'was pleased to reveal his Son to me'. But even though in the Corinthian passage he is arguing for the resurrection, he says nothing about the tomb being found empty.

Some scholars have thought that silence so significant that they have concluded the tradition of the empty tomb was not something that Paul knew, and that it was probably a later invention by the early church. This was not simply an expression of modern radicalism; the 1938 Doctrine Commission Report chaired by Archbishop William Temple noted that some of their members believed 'the connection made in the NT between the emptiness of the tomb and the appearances of the Risen Lord belong rather to the sphere of religious symbolism

than to that of historical fact.'

Other theologians and biblical scholars, including the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, share

such historical scepticism. Indeed some scholars even doubt whether the whole tradition of a particular identifiable tomb was historical, and that Jesus' body may have been thrown into a common burial pit with other criminals. The traditional site of Jesus' tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was only identified as such in the C4th.

That sort of debate applies to the second element in the resurrection, the appearances. When we turn to the gospels each has a rather different account. The vast majority of biblical scholars believe the last chapter of the first gospel to be written, Mark, ends at verse 8, with the women fleeing from the tomb with trembling and astonishment, and with no original account of any resurrection appearance. Matthew and Luke have rather different pictures. Matthew has Jesus appear to the women fleeing from the tomb, asking them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, and then Jesus appears to the disciples on the mountain in Galilee. But in Matthew the accounts are brief, only twenty verses in all.

Luke's gospel has nothing about any appearance by Christ near the tomb, but according to Luke it was angels who gave the women the message that Jesus had risen. Luke then has accounts that appear only in his gospel; the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the disciples recounting that Jesus had appeared to Peter, and then Jesus appearing to all the disciples and departing from them at Bethany, near Jerusalem. Luke elaborates that story in the Acts of the Apostles with his account of the Ascension. In contrast to Matthew, Luke says nothing about any appearances in Galilee: all the appearances in his gospel happen in or near Jerusalem.

It is only when we get to John's Gospel, which many scholars believe was a much later document, that we get the more detailed stories with which we are familiar: Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene by the tomb, then to most of the disciples in Jerusalem, then to Thomas a week later, and then, in the final chapter, the various appearances in Galilee.

These very different accounts are problematic. It is difficult to square the appearances that Paul identifies to the Corinthians with the various accounts that occur in the different Gospels. The variety of the stories of appearances in the Gospels,



BRBurton23 (pixabay.com) CC0 Public Domain
<https://www.neepix.com/photo/download/1290233/resurrection-jesus-yeshua-tomb-wall-old-stone-nature-ancient>

with those Gospels that are widely believed to be later having more accounts of appearances than the earlier ones, also makes the objective reader wonder how much of these stories is actual history and how much is later reflections of the Gospel writers seeking to strengthen the belief of their readers in the resurrection. It is also notable that it is only in the later books, Matthew, Luke and John, written forty or more years after the described events, that the resurrection body of Jesus appears to be of such a sort that he can be physically handled and is observed eating; Paul's account of the resurrection contains nothing like that.

There is also a problem of the consistency of the gospels. If one believes, for example, that John's stories are accurate, and that the appearance to Thomas in the presence of the disciples a week after the first Easter was historically the case, there is the extraordinary problem that neither Matthew nor Luke mentions it. Why? Did they not know of it, or did they not think it important? Either explanation seems very remarkable, which is no doubt one of the reasons why a number of NT scholars doubt that story's historical accuracy as opposed to its theological value.

If one believes, as I do, that some sort of appearances might well have happened, what sort of appearances were they? Were they ones that, if cameras had existed at the time, would have been caught on film, or were they appearances given only to those who had the eyes of faith? If the latter, as seems at least possible from the limited evidence we have, then in what sense can we say they were real objective appearances rather than subjective visions, like the visions people do sometimes have of those who have died who were very important for them? Given the length of time between the events and their being written down in the Gospels, and then the passage of time until now, it seems very unlikely that we shall ever know for certain the answer to such speculation.

Those are the sorts of questions that lie behind the debates of NT scholars, and the important point is that there are serious Christian men and women on all sides of the argument. It is not a simple question of swallowing the lot or leaving it. But perhaps even more important is the fact that today a huge number of people belong to the worldwide Christian Church and find Jesus to be an inspiration that provides for them a guide on how to live. Whatever it was that caused resurrection belief in the first place, for someone who held no official position and died an ignominious death that must indeed be resurrection.



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



Corona Virus

In these desperate, lonely days
we can find strength in our faith.
Maybe the name for this troublesome virus
was chosen for its crown like appearance
or its similarity to the 'corona' of light
surrounding the sun during an eclipse.
Corona suggests undefeatable power,
awesomeness.
Beware!
But, how different from that other crown –
of thorns, never to be forgotten
as we revisit the Good Friday stories.

Thankfully, Good Friday is followed by Easter Day.
We can celebrate the deep truth
Jesus revealed to powerful Pilate.
'My kingdom is not of this world',
or as St. Paul wrote,
'God's apparent weakness
is stronger than human strength'.

Despite this troublesome virus,
despite our isolation
we can and will still celebrate Easter,
assured that there is nothing
which can exterminate God
who will give us the strength to cope,
come what may both in this earthly life
and in that mystery
which we trust lies beyond bodily death.
Halleluiah indeed!

Ros Murphy

Let's hear it for Judas

The article “Judas – A Psychiatric View” PV32 was fascinating but I wonder whether it started from the right place? The characterisation of Judas as the epitome of treachery and betrayal has never rung true to me. What does it say for Jesus that one of his closest companions could turn totally against him? Come to that, could the “eternal damnation” of Judas be part of the plan of a “loving” God? It also casts an odd light on the Last Supper that, according to John, it was virtually still in Judas’ mouth as he went off to betray Jesus (John 13:27). Is it possible that Judas wanted to get Jesus into “protective custody” until the politically charged Passover season was over? But that is not betrayal. The story does not ring true and should be rethought in the wider Bible context.

Judas was a disciple, one of that closest group of followers surrounding Jesus. We are not told much about him, but then again, we are not told much about most of the disciples. Presumably he was one among equals but he was clearly an able administrator because he was appointed to look after the common purse. This sustained not just Jesus and the twelve but sometimes a much greater number of followers (e.g. Luke 10:1). If Judas wanted to steal from the common purse he needed Jesus alive – to be rid of him would be “killing the goose that laid the golden egg”! John 13: 28-29 suggests that it was quite usual for Judas to undertake special errands for Jesus. Taken together, it seems that Judas was in the “engine room” of the disciples, allowing the group to function. Fast forward to the Last Supper and we find Jesus and the disciples at table together. They presumably followed the usual etiquette for a formal meal, reclining on their left sides around a horseshoe-shaped table with Jesus, as host, at the left elbow. In this arrangement it was only possible for a diner to deal directly with the participants on either side. John, as “best friend”, would have been in front of Jesus and to speak to him had to lie back against his breast (John 13:25). Even more significantly, the guest of honour would be on the other side of the host and was the only other person to whom the host could directly pass food (John 13:26). Was Judas the guest-of-honour?!

What, then, was the bigger story at the first Easter? The Triumphal Entry was clearly a deliberate enactment of Zechariah 9:9 and draws attention to that book. Zechariah 11 prophesies God’s exasperation with both the nation and its leadership and as a result they will be “handed over to a neighbour” (suffer foreign subjugation) and another “shepherd” will be appointed. He eventually gives up his task in exasperation and is paid off with “thirty pieces of silver”, a derisory sum. The parallels

to the situation of the first Easter are clear. In effect Jesus accused the Jewish leadership of failing in their duty to the people. This raises the question of when and how Jesus planned this challenge (availability of the donkey, the Last Supper etc.) – and the obvious possibility is the Transfiguration. This was a major spiritual experience for Peter (2 Peter 1:17-18) and he appears to have been responsible for identifying Moses and Elijah. Such identification was simply impossible since the Bible mentions no identifying features for them and all likenesses were specifically forbidden by the Ten Commandments. What the disciples saw was two unidentified men talking to Jesus about his arrangements for Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

So, enacting Zechariah’s prophecy Jesus came to Jerusalem and challenged the Jewish leadership by his Triumphal Entry, the Cleansing of the Temple, the Parable of the Tenants etc. This challenge was clearly recognised (Matt 21:45). All that remained for Jesus was to get paid off with the derisory “thirty pieces of silver” and the obvious way to arrange that very sensitive task was to entrust it to his most trusted and able assistant, namely Judas. That, presumably, was the pre-arranged errand on which Jesus sent him and which the disciples observed (John 13:29) - noticeably after they had all shared the fellowship of the Last Supper. Likewise, it appears that Jesus had pre-arranged where he would be some hours later (Gethsemane) and, to avoid accidents, arranged to be standing away from the disciples when the guard arrived. Judas greeted him with a kiss to denote “task completed as commissioned” and Jesus was arrested.

For the Jewish leadership, however, the problem became how to be rid of this most awkward, but much respected and popular, challenger. Passover was a politically highly charged occasion with its echoes of liberation and freedom (the Exodus) so they may well have been concerned about the possibility of some sort of popular uprising and the blood bath that would certainly have followed. There was nothing ironic in Caiaphas’ concern about the continued presence of Jesus (John 11:49,50). The leadership could have dealt with Jesus themselves by stoning (cf John 8:1-5, Acts 7:54-60), but that would have implicated them as the wicked shepherds in Zechariah’s prophecy. Somehow, they had to make the Romans responsible, but the Romans appeared most relaxed about Jesus – unbothered by the Triumphal Entry, presumably seeing it as a Jewish religious issue. Much of the Easter story is about how this was done, by threatening civil unrest and also playing on the resentments of the crowd to humiliate Pilate by making him crucify an innocent man.

Of course, all the gospels agree about the irredeemable evil and guilt of Judas. That might simply be because the other disciples did not know or realise what Jesus was planning. Alternatively, there might have been some resentment that Judas was more closely involved in Jesus' plan than they. It is more likely that, in retrospect, the disciples felt deeply guilty about their inaction and lack of support for Jesus throughout this whole painful time and needed somebody to blame. It was much easier and more tolerable to put all the blame on Judas, who by then could not answer back!

It is worth reflecting on the ultimate outcomes of this momentous week, because none of them was as expected. First, poor Judas was so horrified and desolated that his faithfulness and service resulted in the death of his beloved leader that he committed suicide. Jesus made no secret that his primary mission was to the Jewish nation, as shown by, for example, Matt 10:5, Mark 7:27, his invocation of Zechariah, even his appointment of twelve disciples (symbolic of the twelve tribes). His immediate followers also fully recognized this, for example Cleopas on his way to Emmaus (Luke 24:19-21). That said, Jesus had been quick to recognize that his vision was perhaps too limited, for example, when confronted by the Roman Centurion (Matt 8:10) or the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:29) who clearly inspired him to go preaching in the gentile area of Decapolis (Mark 7:31). It is also worth recalling that the first Christians were faithful, observant Jews (Acts 2:46). At his death Jesus appeared to conclude that it had all been in vain with his cry of "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" from the cross. These are the opening words of Psalm 22. It is a cry of desperation from somebody who, despite their total faithfulness to God, is suffering brutal, unbearable, pain and scorn but it ends with the conviction that somewhere in the future it will all work out (Psalm 22: 30,31). In fact, the net result of Jesus' ministry far exceeded his Jewish intentions and triggered the spread of the Jewish perception and understanding of God far beyond that community. In fact, it became one of the major formative influences of the world as we now know it extending far beyond its Jewish roots. No question that, as William Cowper put it, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform"!

So, let's hear it for Judas – the devoted, capable, dependable friend of Jesus, perhaps the only disciple who fully understood him, who by his faithfulness brought Jesus' work to fruition but paid for it with his life and reputation.



Jeff Smith was a nuclear scientist for 25 years followed by 16 years as a Methodist minister. Now retired.

Paradoxical

God's Paradoxical World

We are told that God's ways are not our ways but that we are made in the image of God. Surely then, we should try to discern these ways, to follow them – in God's world which is also our world.

Our ways of government often involve compulsion, violence, injustice, oppression.

God's ways seem to involve justice, love in action, humility, but how can we, mere humans, make any difference?

Jesus taught that love is like yeast. Insignificant amounts moistened and warmed gradually transform the whole, little by little, an ongoing process.

We have the Spirit's water of life, the warmth of the light of Jesus, enabling us, as the yeast, gradually to make a difference, taking time, never succumbing to despondency.

God's time is not our time either. We must not be impatient, but play our part, mostly unobserved, except by God, the master baker who depends on us for the infinitesimal part of the Kingdom entrusted to each one.

Ros Murphy

June 2020 | 11

We Are Shadows

In 2014 I visited Spitalfields, researching my family history. The East End was where my grandfather, then a child, settled with his family in 1907. Like so many other Jewish immigrants at that time, they were fleeing pogroms in Russia. I'd found the 1911 census record, which located my family at 2 Fashion Street. I knew from my grandfather's memoirs that he, his two sisters and his parents rented just two rooms in the building, a living room and a bedroom for his parents. At night, he slept on a plank laid between two chairs in the living room.

As I left Fashion Street and turned into Brick Lane, I came across the Brick Lane Mosque, and on its wall, high up, saw a sun dial (see picture). This simple, classical sundial, which dates from 1743 when the building was constructed, is headed by the words "Umbra Sumus" – Latin for "We are Shadows" – biblical words most appropriate for a sundial and presaging the history of the building, which began life as a Protestant chapel for the wave of Huguenot refugees, then briefly became a Wesleyan chapel. Its next incarnation in the late nineteenth century was as the Spitalfields Great Synagogue, serving (along with many other synagogues in the area) the next wave of refugees, amongst whom were my grandfather and his family. In the 1970s, the synagogue reopened as a mosque to serve Spitalfields' latest wave of incomers, from Bangladesh. The history of this building, with its many and various congregations which come and go, fleetingly making their home here, illustrates poignantly the truth of the words on the sundial. As it says in the first book of Chronicles, "For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding."

Umbra Sumus. We are shadows... this idea of impermanence, of life being brief, comes up again and again in the Bible. Isaiah contrasts the fragility of human life with the word of God: "A voice says, 'Cry!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

This idea of human impermanence is repeated many times in the Psalms and also features in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and the letters of Peter and James. Man is repeatedly likened to flowers and grass, which spring up quickly and as quickly wither and die, or to shadows, breath or mist which appear briefly and then dissipate or fade.

I find these ideas deeply moving. That is of course their intent. The idea is to fill us with a sense of our littleness in the vast immensity of time and to



contrast with the permanence and security to be found in God. They are sometimes comforting, as in Psalm 92, which reassures us "that though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever". But generally the mood is that we all flourish briefly and then perish; this is the natural order. So how should we respond to this?

There are various answers to this fundamental question. There is the position that life is absurd – nothing has any meaning. Shakespeare memorably put these words into Macbeth's mouth – "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But Macbeth only comes to this despairing view of life after he has violated its most sacred law; after he has committed murder.

In modern times, Existentialists have asserted that life has no meaning; but they have had to acknowledge that philosophical concepts aside, humans do actually find meaning in their daily challenges and reasons to carry on. We don't all kill ourselves, which would be the natural response to a life of utter meaninglessness and absurdity.

The idea that life is meaningless is also toyed with in the Bible in the book of Ecclesiastes. The

Preacher in Ecclesiastes ruminates for twelve chapters on the fruitlessness of human endeavour before concluding that the good life is one which honours God and treads a middle way. He comes down in the end on the side of finding our permanence not in the things and experiences of this life but in serving God.

There is the response of the Epicureans, summed up in Horace's famous quote, *Carpe Diem* or seize the day – with its overtones that we can only be sure of today, not of what tomorrow may bring. And there's yet another way. It's the understanding that it is life's very briefness which gives it meaning. Knowing my time is finite is what inspires me to act. If I knew I had forever, I would endlessly put off doing anything at all!

Unless we are Existentialists, knowledge of life's brevity often leaves us desperate to leave some legacy behind us, to make our marks on the world. From the most imposing monuments to the graffiti sprayed onto walls or carved into those monuments from ancient times onwards, humans are impelled to claim some sort of immortality in the world they know they must leave after all too short a span. But existence – and above all, evolution - requires death. Without death, there could be no children, no new generations, no change, no development. So we are born, we flourish, wither and die. This is the natural order of things: inexorable, inevitable, inescapable. It is necessary, beautiful and yet also personally tragic for each and every one of us.

Tragic in that we – amongst all the species inhabiting this planet - are uniquely conscious that we will die; beautiful and indeed glorious in that we are also uniquely conscious that we are alive. We may rail against this fruitlessly; or we may use it as a springboard to incentivise our best efforts to make of life something beautiful while we can. And we have been inspired to create and leave behind us some magnificent things. Works of art and cultural legacy which still inspire awe, joy and wonder. And for all those of us who will never be great artists, writers or monument-builders, there are the lasting impressions we leave on our friends and families and other people we have affected. But there is a dark side to our legacy. Many of us watched David Attenborough's *Blue Planet* series and were horrified by the tide of plastic infesting our fish, birds and oceans. Unfortunately our most lasting legacy may yet be the mountains of plastic and the nuclear waste we will leave behind us long after our kind has become extinct.

Primo Levi was spot on about plastic in his book "The Periodic Table". Talking about the 1940s, he says: "... the great problem of packaging, [which] every chemist knows: and it was well known to God Almighty, who solved it brilliantly, as he is wont to, with cellular membranes, eggshells, the multiple peel of oranges, and our own skins, because after all, we too are liquids. Now, at that time, there did

not exist polyethylene [plastic], which would have suited me perfectly, since it is flexible, light, and splendidly impermeable: but it is also a bit too incorruptible, and not by chance God Almighty himself, although he is a master of polymerisation, abstained from patenting it: He does not like incorruptible things." Those words seem prescient. The whole problem of plastic is also one of its virtues – it is incorruptible and does not decay. The natural order, as pinpointed by Levi, is that everything decays. That which does not, is against nature, against God. But now that we are awakened to the problem of plastic, having hitherto only been convinced of its virtues, perhaps we will work out ways to manage it sustainably; and possibly, once our minds are bent towards such issues, we will also consider the problem of nuclear waste, rather than leaving it as a very unpleasant legacy for countless generations yet to come.

We need to keep in mind that we are not owners but stewards of the earth for the time we spend upon it. And given that our time is short enough, it would be madness to turn our faces to the wall in despair at the prospect of death and the futility of it all. Instead we should choose life, for the time that we enjoy this greatest of all gifts.

An old bumper sticker said "Life is not a dress rehearsal." But often we live as if it is, or as if we are saving ourselves for a special event which is always in some vague future. Or we're so busy just coping with our daily chores that decades pass and one day we wake up and realise that we're old and the time for gathering rosebuds is fast running out. And we hardly ever got off the treadmill to lie on the grass and watch nature close up and the clouds wheeling by overhead.

In York, there's a shop window bearing the legend, "Life is short – so buy that dress!" But actually we've probably all got plenty of dresses we already own which we rarely if ever wear. So my advice is this: don't save your best china and never use it; don't save your best dress and rarely wear it. Take time out of your busy life to stroll through the fields, to pay attention; to be idle and blessed. Being fully conscious of the present moment is the best way to prolong time! If you break your best china, use the pieces for a mosaic. If you rip your best dress, make a patchwork quilt. Saving stuff for best is surely the essence of futility as tomorrow may never come.

This is the day that the Lord has made.

We may be but shadows but we can choose what sort of shadows we cast. They depend on the choices we make in this precious, little life we enjoy. So choose wisely and well. And then – cast long shadows!



Jenny Jacobs is a trustee, from Harrogate and organised the "Truth, Lies & the Spirit Level" conference about poverty and inequality.

A Darker Pilgrimage

Reflections on 'Who Cares about HIV?'

The title chosen for this reflection was originally suggested as a title for our book. It perhaps should have been the title because it is suggestive of the progress into unhappiness that the clients of the London HIV Chaplaincy, and indeed the chaplain, had to make in attempting to get their voice heard. What should not have been the title was the one that sits on its cover. The clients have accused it of appropriation of their pain and suffering, and of verging on being patronising. In that sense it is all too reflective of the clients' journey!

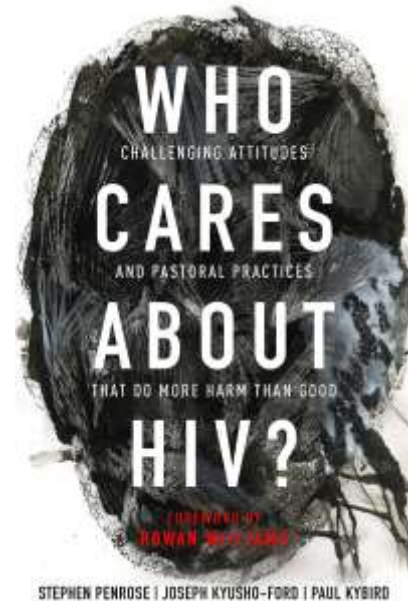
Over the last decade the chaplain had the task of:

- Identifying what the issues were for the clients
- Formulating ways to help them heal the damage
- Feeding back to faith communities where and how things had gone wrong
- Stimulating a process of reflection to ensure nobody was harmed in the same way again

All of these tasks could have been served without recourse to print. Clients deserved their privacy. They were not seeking the limelight. Most are retiring and modest. They are recipients of a long experience of untrustworthy treatment from faith communities which means they are not motivated by a desire to contribute to pastoral programmes, or to hand over stories of unhappiness to be 'clucked' over and appropriated. They are usually fiercely independent, and not of a mind to get 'revenge'. *They simply long for a response – and that is where problems begin!*

One Methodist theologian suggested to us that people who complained about the church were (in his words) 'treated like suicide bombers'. None of our clients have such terrorist intentions. In seeking help from the Chaplaincy, their aims were to understand what had happened to them and to formulate, with the help of others, answers that would allow them to process their issues and still live lives of faith. They are sensitive people who are most likely to blame themselves rather than others for their problems. They are also very trusting in many ways, which makes the assault they have endured on their vision, values and character all the more unforgivable.

The book is a story of how perfectly well-meaning pastoral workers and ministers have tried to 'force square pegs into round holes'. They have imposed upon people who have come to them for care predetermined 'client profiles'. They have been driven by ideological agendas that have nothing to do with the people in front of them. With the best of intentions, many have in that way reduced our clients to passive victims. As the book shows, they have developed theological imagery which has



demanding nothing of people who have been searching for something bigger than themselves and wanted to give more. Our clients have even been caught up as pawns in the quarrels of communities that are more concerned with power struggles than pastoral care.

Client profiles developed in one context were misapplied to our clients so that, as a result, what they were actually looking for was not heard. Their personalities and qualities were underestimated. The result? They were *immobilised by compassion!* In addition, finally, clients' descriptions of abusive treatment was dismissed as 'lying', 'being fed by a hostile media', and resented as attacks on a church already 'feeling the heat'. They were faced with a wall of unjust and inaccurate labels. They have been reduced to 'categories' by their sexuality, gender or skin colour, despite the reality we discovered that what really distinguishes them from one another are their values and their beliefs.

Those responsible for such treatment are, we find, as much 'progressive' as 'traditional'; equally 'evangelical' and 'liberal'. Time and again, in the attempt to present these issues, the Chaplaincy has been hammered by both 'left' and 'right' for not being ideologically correct. We have even been lectured to that 'nobody could speak for the clients except themselves' when we have brought clear evidence that when clients had attempted to do just that, they were summarily dismissed.

So our book! It is about the cruelty, ignorance and the appropriation of others' pain for ideological purposes. It is about pastoral failure. The pain our clients' have experienced is not that faith communities are not relevant, biblical, modern or conservative, it is that they are not good or honest. They have seen the cover-up of cruelty and heard the most disgraceful excuses. They have been hurt

at the hands of communities that are more protective of themselves than of others.

Much is made on all sides of faith communities about the value of this or that belief. Our book makes it plain that such issues are irrelevant if people do not actually encounter 'glimpses of goodness and traces of truth'. And it is worth noting that the testimonies of our clients make it clear that goodness is not the same thing as 'love' or 'compassion' as popularly conceived in the church - it is infinitely more challenging and demanding.

Many of our clients have lived with HIV for many years. They have learned to adapt to the demands of taking combination therapy. They have also lived with the side effects. There is well-documented evidence that some antiretrovirals contribute to 'low mood' or depression. It is often very difficult for such patients to have their descriptions of their depression acted on by medical staff. It leaves them feeling as if what they have to say is of no value. The further burden of being offered pastoral care that reshapes what they say, or instantly dismisses it, or calls into question the truth of their perceptions, 'because we all have our subjective views after all', is utterly crushing. Worse still is the very idea that individuals are capable of perceiving anything true, being instantly dismissed for theological or philosophical reasons. Whether it is meant negatively or not, the end result is that the client carries the burden of being totally silenced, blotted out, obliterated, all because we are no longer equipped pastorally to handle the topic of truth. Clients have initiated a dialogue because they expect and need a response. In the end that was what motivated us to publish our book. Yet since its launch, sadly we are not aware of any attempt to grapple with the issues of why such failures of care might have occurred or why church leaders and pastoral carers of all theologies, sexualities and genders have reacted with such negative ferocity to our clients. Ultimately for the clients and for us the question is why any of these versions of faith failed to show 'glimpses of goodness' when both the clients and the other who contributed to the book yearn to see faith communities demonstrate it!

At the launch, the chaplain said that he did not want a book. Despite his reservations, the Chaplaincy trustees felt that a book of his reflections and writings would be a way to enable the voice of the clients to be heard that would effectively challenge faith communities to respond. The wait continues!

'Copies of 'Who Cares about HIV?' can be bought at £8.50 (inc. p&p)
steve@ispy101.org.uk

Joseph Kyusho-Ford has been chaplain to the London HIV Chaplaincy for the last 10 years.

Sanctuary

Shafts of light
Through cathedral windows.
Dappled shade
Upon the leaves
Beneath my feet.
Bird song
In the branches above.

In the distance
Hind and fawn
Cross the forest track.
The sweet fragrance of autumn
Fills the misty air.

A gentle breeze
Moving colours
To the forest floor.

So precious
Such beauty,
So hard to find
Such peaceful sanctuary.

Chris Roe

Eternal Life

The mists of eternity blossom beyond the grave
as invisible to mortal eyes
as those before the womb,
for we are mortal beings,
tied to the traces of our life span,
yet inventive of what is beyond sight or feeling.

Our self-centred minds deny extinction
and so we invent new reasons for living
new hopes for what lies beyond life
and new strictures to apply.

Some even see death as a gateway
opening the door to new opportunities
paid for in the currency of life on earth
and denied to those who ignore the rules,
which they, or others, have defined.

This is dominant religion of whatever form or title.

Some see death as an adventure
a step taken bravely into the unknown.
Some see death as an escape
from whatever is their trouble.
Yet there is no knowing into what we are projected.
When we lose the last of life's consciousness,
we discard our past, and may start anew,
or just stop. Run out of fuel.

Does that excite or terrify?

Edward Conder
June 2020 | 15

Local groups

Please contact group convenors or see the relevant PCN Britain web page for further details and to check when meetings restart. Newcomers are always welcome.

Abingdon

Cliff Marshall

01235 530480 cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk

We were very pleased to host the public lecture 'How Jews and Christians Read the Bible', on 27 Feb, by Prof. John Barton, author of 'A History of the Bible'. We had a good audience of nearly eighty who came from local churches, PCN groups in our region or from the local community. John's talk was well received and raised interesting questions. His book is a well-written, accessible and detailed text derived from a lifetime of biblical scholarship. It is a useful reference for any group. Our Mar meeting examined some of the issues raised by John's talk but by our Apr meeting we were unable to meet. We look forward to being able to get together again and pick up where we left off viewing the new PCN Britain video resources. Our normal group meetings will be at 7.30pm at St Michael's Church Room, Abingdon OX14 1DU on the first Monday of each month once we resume. All details on our webpage.

Bolton

Jim Hollyman

01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our last very rewarding meeting was held on 4 Mar. At our Feb meeting we had listened to Marcus Borg's lecture "Mysticism and the Christian Faith". Discussion brought us to particular interest in meditation and, as one of our members attends a meditation group, we decided to invite a speaker on that subject. Joanne Caine came to our Mar meeting and, after an introductory talk, we shared a time of meditation. We all found it to be a creative and inspiring time. When we next meet, we will consider aspects of meditation as well as continuing with the Borg series of lectures under the title "Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary". We are in touch with each other by email but, when we are allowed to meet again, our meetings will continue to be on the first Wed each month at 1.30-3pm at 121 Junction Road, Bolton, BL3 4NF.

16 | PV 33

Newcastle

Liz Temple

01207 505564

liz.temple@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our three pre-Covid meetings were well attended, a time for friendships to begin and flourish alongside presentations and discussions full of interest and challenge. Our Jan meeting 'Prayer from a Progressive Perspective' was ably led by Jane, who quoted from the excellent 'Looking in the Distance' by Richard Holloway. Jane distinguished between individual prayer, closely related to meditation, and group prayer which gives a voice to our shared dreams, hopes and fears. We then split into small groups to compose our own 'progressive' prayers – not straightforward!

In Feb Pat asked us to prepare for the meeting by reading Richard Holloway's paper 'Religion and Atheism' from the June 2019 London conference. We considered how his words speak to each of us, in our own situations and states of mind. The importance of 'loving our neighbours as ourselves' seemed to be the main strand of our responses, with much personal consideration of what that means in practice.

For our Lenten meeting Hellen looked ahead, speaking about how some of our much-loved Easter customs have developed, under Christian, pagan and other influences. Much to our surprise, Hellen then produced a large carrier bag containing carefully blown eggs, googly eyes, cress seeds and marker pens, with enough for everyone. We fell to the task, enjoying every minute, and all taking away a personalised egg bearing the seeds of new life. Some of the results were particularly artistic! The newsletters have been good to keep us in touch. Thanks.

St Albans

John Churcher

01727 760058

john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk

Lock down has seen us move online. Our Mar speaker was Rachael Williams, "What is a Progressive Christian Theology of the 'Holy Land'?" Rachael explored the conflict as one of the most complex in modern history. This lively Zoom meeting discussed the following:

- What does the Bible teach about the "promised land"?

- What does the Bible teach about war, conflict and peace-making?
- How should progressive Christians be involved in this conflict?
- Can our theology, prayers and actions serve the cause of peace?

The speaker in Apr was Lawrence Moore <https://walkingthewalk.org.uk> on the subject of Justice. The focus of the talk was Jesus' "bias to the poor". Lawrence considered grace / justice in God's economy as giving to each according to their need, in which Jesus made putting the neediest first as the criterion of justice. Once again this was an excellent sharing together.

Rachael Williams returned as our May speaker and explored some thoughts on Revelation and how our reading of this might impact our views on social justice. Our initial fears concerning moving to online meetings for the duration of lock down proved to be unfounded. Although numbers 'attending' were less than our normal face to face monthly meetings, Zoom with its flexibility of break out rooms, etc. actually encouraged deeper exploration and engagement of the subjects under discussion. However, we look forward to getting back to group meetings at Trinity.

North Staffs

Nigel Jones

01782 632895

nigel.jones@pcnbritain.org.uk

In Feb David Simcock, CoFE lay reader, outlined the thoughts of a few Jewish Holocaust theologians. (Summary on website.) It ended with one writer saying that true religious response is about acceptance and hope, not explanation.

I led Mar by reading a chapter from Dave Tomlinson's 'Black Sheep and Prodigals'; entitled "God is just a word". In his own style, he takes a radical view, and somewhat similar to Marcus Borg bases his own belief in God on interpretation of certain personal mystical experiences.

For our Apr 'meeting', our member Geoff Locke sent us a summary of his study of the Pilgrim Fathers. I remember particularly how the Separatist Puritans could no longer tolerate the intolerance from the Anglican Church because they wanted people to be free in their religious beliefs. Also the help they received from a native Indian tribe when they were in difficulties after landing in America. There was a small amount of comment about this. If anyone wants the text, contact me.

We hope our next 'meeting' will be about Christian belief and science from a lecturer in Astrophysics at Keele University, which may be a video and/or written text.

Tavistock

01822 618142

Mike Dennis

mikedennis_uk@yahoo.co.uk

We followed up Dec with a further talk in Jan by Trevor Dennis entitled "The Bible can be sad" (Free to Believe 2018). Feb's was a youtube film by Bart Erhman on the theme of "Misquoting Jesus in the Bible". In Mar we hosted a talk by Tony Staunton on "Global dangers". This was part of the CND national tour giving an overview of so many of the significant issues of our time. The threat of Covid-19 was an additional element and there was much to consider. The evening was put on in conjunction with Tavistock Peace Action Group and drew a wider than usual audience. Within days our world had changed and all the remaining events that had been planned needed to be cancelled. As things stand we do not know when we will be able to recommence.

Vale of Glamorgan Sue O'Hare

07713 354776

sue.ohare@pcnbritain.org.uk

Well you would have thought that we would thrive on change, but the sorts of changes that Covid-19 have thrust upon us are challenging! We were just about to launch our own 'change'. The change was not an easy one to make but necessary. For over 20 years now, we have been meeting in member's homes. This has worked very well, has helped to create the lovely atmosphere we enjoy and a safe space to share. Since Christmas our numbers have grown and we reached a potential of over twenty of us meeting regularly. We decided to start looking to meet in one of the local church buildings. The church we chose, Barry Uniting Church (URC and Methodist), meets at present in a porta cabin, pending a new premises being built by the end of the year. It was a good compromise we thought, as the cabin doesn't look too much like a church and the new building is to have a coffee bar/cafe area which would be good for future use. Well - that was the plan! Instead of contemplating (however reluctantly), a new venue in which to meet - we found we have no venue! (like everyone else at this time).

We have created a WhatsApp group

for us to stay connected with each other and we also enjoy the weekly newsletter. A couple of our members don't have email so mail still has a good use to pass it on!

We miss being with each other, but it's good that we are still able to share news, reading ideas, subjects for discussion online, meditations, music, pictures etc. Some of us are also following Dave Tomlinson's broadcast on Facebook from his 'Holy Shed', which brings us together on a Sunday (old habits die hard). Another positive is that numbers are no longer a problem!

Mid-Wilts

01380 738155

Janet Tanner

janet.tanner@pcnbritain.org.uk

Hurray for Zoom! We are now meeting fortnightly, so great is our need for each other's company. Just after Easter, we watched in advance 2 short YouTube videos (Richard Holloway and Marcus Borg) about resurrection, and discussed them, sharing our own experiences and thoughts. At the next we will be responding to the invitation in the newsletter to suggest changes we would like to see in the new normal that will come, eventually.

All our group is well, and we send very best wishes to everyone.

N Worcester

01562 884344

David Tubb

david.tubb@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our meetings having been suspended for the time being, we are all thrown back on to our own resourcefulness – and reflection. At our Mar meeting, we were due to continue our sharing of progressive texts. When we can meet again it will be interesting to see how lockdown and existential anxieties may have affected our thinking.

At such a time one begins to wonder whether many people simply want to hang on to familiar beliefs. Yet, I believe the exploration of faith that PCN and others support is the right course in the search for relevance in the modern world. The difference between a literal understanding of scripture and a more metaphorical approach is surely more than mere semantics. This, coupled with an honest full-on acknowledgement of the insights of the Enlightenment, can lead towards a this-worldly spirituality to which the life and teaching of Jesus points.

Memoriam



David Charles Edwards

(full obituary on the website)

On 9th March, Rugby PCN shared memories of David and thought of his family following his sudden death from heart failure on 6th March. We will miss his presence greatly. As a founding member of our group in 2004 he has been a driving force in publicising its ethos and contributing to the programme.

Born in 1938, David was rooted in Anglicanism, son of Mervyn Charles-Edwards, Bishop of Worcester. At Cambridge his theological convictions were influenced by conversations with Bishop John Robinson and Harry Williams CR. Ordained a Deacon but a crisis of faith linked to his first wife's death to cancer, meant he did not proceed to seek ordination to priesthood until a move to Rugby with his second wife Alison. There he was encouraged by the open Liberal theology in the Rugby Team Ministry.

David loved a good discussion, and had the gift of being challenging whilst also showing a warm tolerance for opposing viewpoints. He acknowledged the importance of traditional belief for the faith of many, but sought to give space for questions and dialogue for those for whom such beliefs were difficult, incorporating scholarship that enabled different understandings. David supported women's ordination, opposed official Church teaching on homosexuality, raising this, and issues about the nature of Jesus, in sermons. Believing passionately about social justice and our stewardship of the environment he raised climate change concerns inside and outside of the Church. He felt that the way forward was to build connections between people of all religions and none for the common good. This is the subject of the book written with his friend Simon Burne and published prior to his death. 'The Wobbly Bridge' is available for £10 (inc p&p) from Simon at simonburne@ntlworld.com.

Sue Goddard & Nicola Phelan

June 2020 | 17

Reviews

A God Beyond Belief, Lance Moore, Circle Books



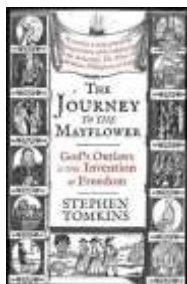
Moore argues that faith is on the back foot with outdated and dogmatic attitudes and customs, and seeing things as opposites. We should think of paradoxes,

connected tensions between ideas and opinions, that need deep, sincere thought and resolution. Much that the Church does is out of step, above all with science and sexuality. Moore's discussion of sexuality is the best argued section. Statements like 'we love the sinner but hate the sin' makes second-class citizens of some. This is part of a wider commentary on how robust and inclusive the Christian message and way of life really needs to be to have impact on a world where secularist indifference and post-truth consumerism seem to dominate everyone's lives. He suggests that religion is at risk of being self-righteous and judgemental, keener on rules than on grace and love. It resists change, too often locks its ideas on culturally-outmoded practices, dissipates its energies on pointless subtleties, and finds difficulty in getting a narcissistic culture to understand what it is to share and 'love one another' rather than promote self-interest. All issues which are, and can be, represented in crude oppositional terms - this good, that bad, us right, you wrong - and not in terms amenable to paradox, where there is space seeing beyond contradiction. We comprehend the created world, its design and order and miraculous gifts, if we can transcend such contradiction.

Moore presents eleven key paradoxes, with discussion points for church groups, reminding us, if we needed it, that great leaders can wash feet, ride on a donkey and die on a cross. A thoughtful hard-hitting book, chatty and friendly, one of several by this author. He lays down the challenge that 'either/or' thinking grows into 'both/and' thinking if you grow up as a Christian, one progressive Christians will welcome.

Stuart Hannabuss

The Journey to the Mayflower by Stephen Tomkins, Hodder



2020 marks the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Pilgrim Fathers to a new and uncharted life. In America this is being celebrated as one of the key moments in the foundation of the

New World. Amidst the celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic, there will be all kinds of assumptions made about these almost sanctified and heroic 'courageous travellers' and their choice of life in a brave new world. Stephen Tomkins' well researched and well written book takes us skillfully into the lives and, most importantly, the beliefs of this band of single minded rebels. Forged in the heat of the Marian persecution, these 'separatists' identified and honed the 'purity' of their position during the reign of Elizabeth I, rejecting unequivocally the Church of England with its close links to the state. Their unbending position led eventually to their journey on the Mayflower. However, there is, as so often in religious history, a real irony. Fleeing England and undertaking a hazardous journey in 1620 into the unknown in order to achieve the freedom to believe in their own way, the Puritans were dramatically intolerant of others - native Americans and dissenters like the Quakers. A recent book published in America suggests that President Trump's presidency can be seen as the latest manifestation of a strain of religious thought that derives from the Puritans who arrived on the Mayflower. As with so much good history, this book, fascinating in its detail, and a good read in its own right, also offers, through its story, ways of thinking about some of the big issues of our time. How is the Puritan legacy being played out in the 21st century?

Christine King

Heaven and Hell by Bart Ehrman, Oneworld

Ehrman provides a popular approach to western ideas of heaven and hell which surveys rather than critiques, educates and entertains, and leaves you to reassess your own beliefs. The first third is devoted to Greek and Roman myths; it then ranges widely over canonical and

extracanonical Hebrew and Christian texts. Its value is showing there was

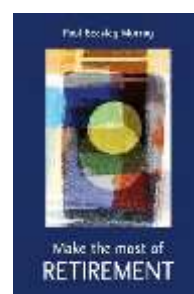


never a single Greek, Jewish, or Christian understanding of the afterlife. Homer's vision is of a bleak, dreary existence in Hades; Virgil's belief is in hellish torments

and heavenly glories; the ancient Israelites' view is that death is the end, but not to be feared. Ehrman then gives a lucid description of the teachings of Jesus and Paul. For him Paul's understanding of bodily resurrection into a new transformed 'body' is key - but he says little about Paul's concept of soul or spirit. The ideas of Augustine and the first four centuries C.E. are detailed but later thinking, such as universal salvation or re-incarnation, is only summarised. This is not a history of the afterlife across different cultures. There is only a passing reference to Islam and sources such as the possible evidence from Near Death Experiences are not used. His conclusion, that there is no existence after death but there is nothing to fear, is not clearly reasoned. Might he discover other possibilities in the eastern Christian and indigenous beliefs of theosis and divinisation? There is no reference to these or any reference to the author's first nation or African American neighbours. As his sources are confined to literate cultures he ignores the extensive writing about the indigenous religions of the world, where an afterlife without eternal damnation is a possibility. My research finds the Iban of Borneo, although most are now Christian, continue to hold their traditional beliefs. These come close to theosis and suggest a more positive conclusion than Ehrman: we become part of creation after death.

Peter Varney

Making the Most of Retirement by Paul Beasley-Murray, BRF



This is a timely book. As in our lives generally, there are seasons of ministry, and Paul argues in this encouraging book that we should make the most of the season of

retirement. Paul's wise advice is optimistic and realistic (and non-denominational), and will find echoes for everyone in the church, not just 'retired' pastors and church leaders. Concise and logically organised, this guide sees retirement as 'beginning a new journey' and 'finding new purpose' and 'living a full life'. He grounds these themes on firm foundations, intelligently avoiding any 'goody two-shoes' tone of voice. Sensibly, too, and sensitively, he faces up to the challenge of 'preparing for the final journey'. There are three firm foundations for this advice. First is his own life. Without any egotism, he describes how he has grown in retirement. It has been a period of self-discovery, of reflecting on key values and people that have shaped his life. The second draws on relevant studies and his own substantial research. Often evidence of how faith communities flourish, grow and change is based on unreliable anecdotes and subjective impressions. Having more reliable qualitative data is much needed. The third foundation is based on the Christian life, where in retirement the importance of discipleship and forgiveness is more central than ever. Retirement can be a time of resentful marginalisation, nourishing past hurts, fearing mortality and bereavement. Paul reminds us that, while it is a time to put things in order and even to 'let go', it is also a time to face 'the challenge of being', and to seek contentment.

Being honest to God and to yourself as you age and change is probably the most challenging part of the internal narrative we have with ourselves. Paul's book is all about how a Christian pastor or minister can choose to retire, and, how older people still can do so too. A timely book for personal reflection and group exploration.

Stuart Hannabuss

Thief Prisoner Soldier Priest by Paul Cowley, Hodder

Some people are immediately



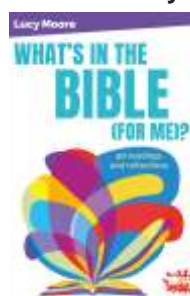
likeable, Paul is one of them. He was my 'buddy' on an educational pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We looked out for each other and made sure the bus never moved on without

one of us. He cares genuinely and passionately for people in an unaffected way – unless you were one of his first two wives or the person at the other end of bar room brawls. I met the Paul of the second half of this fascinating page-turner. The first half tells the almost unbelievable tale of an out-of-control teenage thief, from a dysfunctional family in which there was love mixed with turmoil. He was not a good thief and was caught and remanded many times. His first rescue came when he joined the army, where he became a man determined to succeed and better himself. He diligently worked his way up the non-commissioned ranks acquiring skills and experiences – a driven but unsettled man who married and divorced twice before meeting Amanda. That, and his conversion experience, was the start of the process of transformation to the man I met.

He was ordained and has worked within the Alpha world of Holy Trinity Brompton, being responsible for Alpha in prisons amongst other initiatives. He is an outstanding example of a troubled person transformed into love in action. He is an avowed theist in the charismatic evangelical mould of HTB and is a shining example of the reality that the Spirit cares not a jot for one's theology where love, compassion and commitment are present. This book is his story. It is a compellingly readable and exciting book of Paul's life. It's inspiring.

Fred Pink

What's in the Bible (for Me)? by Lucy Moore, BRF



At a time when we wonder whether the church is relevant and why people don't read the Bible, Messy Church has found imaginative ways of presenting and interpreting scripture.

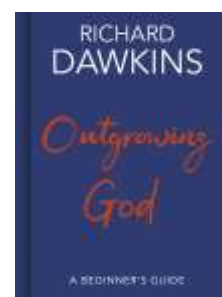
Today's consumerist message of 'what's in it for me?', is adapted in her attractive and useful little book. Lucy presents fifty themes based on the Bible (1/3 OT, 2/3 NT) such as leaving home, making mistakes, feeling lost and being found. This thematic approach, using a short Biblical passage followed by a reflection, makes the approach immediate, practical, and useful for everyday encounters, as well as for

discussion groups and (in the right context) schools.

Little is lost and much is gained by using themes in this way. Nor is it trite to say that there is 'strength in travelling together' and in having 'the stubbornness to keep you moving' 'The compass, map and star to read' (the final poem in the book). Such thoughts acknowledge the transforming impact of the Holy Spirit in everyday life. And it's not Machiavellian of the Church to suggest that we all relate to metaphors, so why not recognise an effective communication channel where it exists. 'The journey of a human being like you or me towards a destination that becomes clearer with each step': that's what's in it for you and me and the rest of us.

Stuart Hannabuss

Outgrowing God by Richard Dawkins, Bantam Press



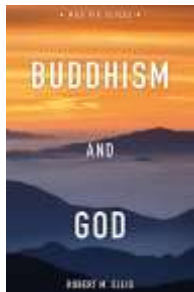
Many years ago I started reading 'The Blind Watchmaker', one of 15 or so books written by Richard Dawkins. I had 'flu at the time, didn't get past

the first chapter and wasn't sufficiently impressed to return to it. I was aware that Dawkins had recently written a new book with children in mind, and following Nigel Bastin's review (PV31), obtained a copy from my local library. This time I enjoyed the read and was thoroughly impressed. One has to forgive the zealot-like approach of the author and his exasperation with the deficit in teaching basic evolutionary principles in schools. The book may be intended for teenagers of 15 years plus (the age when Dawkins outgrew God) but was more than sufficient to interest this 70 year-old bioscience PhD. The text is presented in a personable and story-like way, and is wide-ranging: in religious matters, evolution, embryology, the self-assembly of inorganic and organic matter and fascinating concepts relating to the universe. Dawkins forcibly presents his argument against God by assembling these matters as a continuum, ending in a crescendo. The book should be essential reading for all ordinands, in the hope that reflection on its content may lead to a more modern approach

within the Church. Goodbye God? I'm not sure Dawkins will accomplish his mission. Goodbye to the image fronting his 5th chapter (the face of God looking down on the human race) but perhaps not to the singularity associated with the Big Bang 14 billion years ago.

Robert Williams

Buddhism and God by Robert M. Ellis, Mid Pie



In only 70 pages it articulates serious and contentious content. Ellis is experienced in Christianity, an ex-member of a Buddhist order, and as a philosopher is well placed to

conduct comparative studies. He creates a structured exploration of the meaning of God from differing perspectives (Theists, Buddhists and Universalists), to interrogate and push forward analysis.

And this reveals fundamental ideas, particularly that the notion of an absolute God is unhelpful, and downright dangerous. The Christian God, the Enlightened One, and Universalist religious relativism all start from the premise of the reality of God, which then allows a cycle of self-justified wishful thinking to condone at best limiting and at worst extreme beliefs.

For Ellis the existence of God is irrelevant as he argues for exploring the religious experience, rather than the reality of the Supreme Being. It is through encountering, sharing and exploring this experience that we enhance spirituality, not through dogma and tradition.

It is a fascinating argument, not always easy to follow as the language of philosophical discourse can be hard. But Ellis does also have lightness of touch. When examining the idea that because the 'God' experience shares features across times and faiths, it 'proves' the existence of God he comments: 'This is no more necessarily the case than claiming that if a thousand people scattered across the globe all say they have a headache, therefore they are all in communication with the Cosmic Headache.'

But this book is not merely critical. Ellis sets up an alternative approach using the Buddhist concept of The Middle Way (He is the founder of the Middle Way Society). While this text

is not concerned with establishing or describing this stance, his use of this idea is convincing, convincing enough to make me register for an online Middle Way conference!

Andrew Lancaster

Liza's Avenger by Erin Burnett, Flagship Fiction



Many have tried and many have failed - to write for young people compelling and believable fiction with a Christian message. In Christian fiction, the challenge seems to

be striking a balance between a readable storyline with credible characters, and a set of faith beliefs. Erin Burnett, a promising young writer based in Belfast in Northern Ireland, began this as a gaming script back in 2011. She developed the script into a story which is, on the surface, an exciting tale of journeys and adventure and battles, yet which, underlying this and not at all earnest, is a subtler novel about the ways in which characters can change and grow up. It is targeted at readers between 8 and 14, where its gaming format and atmosphere, its graphic novel tone, characterisation, and fantasy plot-line will appeal greatly to boys and girls alike.

It is a world in the future where human beings, once Christian and humane, have lost faith and are tyrannised by beings, themselves once human but corrupted by magic and evil power. They snatch and kill Hikari's sister Liza, and she is driven in pursuit by blind hate and revenge. With her young friends she goes on a long and dangerous journey to face her enemies, fighting them bravely, persisting to the final encounter with evil in the mountains. The fighting is gripping, the fears they have believable, the questions they ask of themselves mature, the relationships well delineated.

The journey brings them close to evil but also close to good - to realising how belief in Jesus Christ can change revenge to redemption, even in creatures possessed by evil spirits. All the main characters travel this physical and spiritual journey. Erin makes her Christian beliefs quite clear but grounds them in convincing characters. An impressive start to a writing career, above all in a field full of preachy

stuff for young people with cardboard characters and banal tropes, as if writing for children is easy.

Stuart Hannabuss

Franciscan Footprints by Helen Julian, BRF



Writing a short book which recounts the lives of over 100 Franciscans runs the risk of creating a superficial listing, a Franciscan 'Who's Who'. It is impossible to give the developed

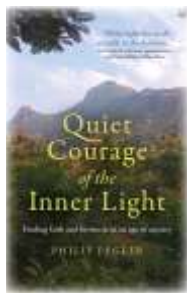
space that creates depth without running to the length of Foxe's Book of Martyrs, and even then, there lies the trap of repetition. The risks are multiplied when one adopts a simple, conversational style. But against such odds, this book is a valuable insight into the Franciscan way.

Helen Julian, a sister of the Community of St Francis, organises her book through the various roles which Franciscans have played, from politician, leader, confessor and priest, from community worker to missionary and preacher. Each section contains the potted history of the most memorable Franciscans, obviously Clare and Francis himself, Padre Pio, Pope John XXII, Duns Scotus, and many that you won't have heard of. The repeated similarities actually build a feeling of community, of shared purpose across so many situations and contexts: the 12th century, South America and China, poor rural Italy and many others.

This feeling of a familiar pattern, told simply (a stylistic choice - see the detailed notes and bibliography) does reflect the message of Franciscan thought as I read it, a humble core unconcerned with complex doctrine but rather finding the spiritual in the ordinary. This is a book intended to be practical, to lead to active contemplation, each chapter ending with questions. This text can be read as a set of exemplars, a range of lives inspirational in their humility and dedication, through which surprising achievements and change happened. I was convinced and intend to read more about these extraordinary men and women who through acts of 'ordinariness' sanctified the everyday.

Andrew Lancaster

Quiet Courage of the Inner Light by Philip Pegler, John Hunt

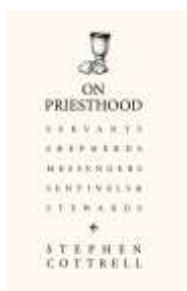


Philip has written of his life-long spiritual journey. He speaks of his many difficulties, setbacks and suffering, and how he has learnt from and grown in understanding

through them. He makes much of our need for acceptance of all that happens in our experience. "Acceptance of everything that transpires in our experience is not mere passivity – it is a positive attitude by which you make the best of what you cannot avoid. Acceptance cannot possibly be a panacea for all ills, but it brings into difficult and disharmonious situations an element of graciousness which tends to function as a healing balm, resolving conflict and attuning us to the natural rhythm of the universe." Philip has travelled widely, especially in India, in search of wisdom and truth and his attitude of openness to all ways of believing is very close to the eight points. He admits he has never felt fully at ease with mainstream Christianity and he gained much from Hinduism and Buddhism in exploring the mystical side of Christianity. He refers to Jesus as "the figure ...who has touched me most deeply, not through biblical texts – but through the heartfelt cantatas of J.S. Bach". This book seeks to celebrate the true worth of courage which is found and sustained by the inner light of the spirit. I found it both reassuring and searching. In what he says about living with anxiety, it is very relevant to today and the way the coronavirus has transformed our ways of living. The book offers pointers to living a life of integrity and the cultivation of the inner life from which loving service to others may spring.

Jim Hollyman

On Priesthood by Stephen Cottrell, Hachette UK



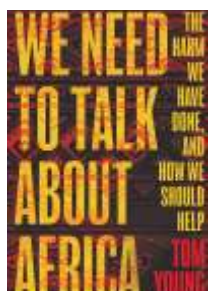
This is an easily readable book of 163 pages, based on addresses given on the eve of ordinations in Chelmsford cathedral. It reveals the humility and practicality of the

man who will soon become archbishop of York. Much of it is focussed on those in ministry; it succeeds in balancing traditional understandings of words and sacraments with directions for living ministry in today's world. Five aspects of Christian ministry; messenger, sentinel, steward, servant and shepherd, are explored in depth to bring us a comprehensive understanding of its nature. The roles of steward and sentinel are at the heart of this. As a steward, the priest works with the gifts God gives to the people in each parish. As sentinels, priests 'seek out places where God can be encountered and considered' and should 'keep on conjuring and purposing alternative futures to the single one that those in power propose.' Cottrell challenges those in ministry to think more deeply about their sense of vocation; he shares much of his own journey, including its pitfalls and challenges, and points readers to ways to deepen their spiritual lives. He stresses the importance of prayer, work and taking time out and offers the metaphor of 'accessing the reservoirs of watching and waiting on God'. 'Bearing the cross of Christ' is, Cottrell says, essential but he reframes this as the need to lose our lives for Christ's sake. For the general reader, and those who may have only a loose church connection, the book offers valuable and refreshingly contemporary ideas. The earth is not 'a resource to plunder' but rather 'we need to rediscover that ancient vocation to be good stewards of the earth ... tending and caring and being a good shepherd.' We can hope that this message of 'reconciliation with the world', equally relevant to our contemporaries who follow other religions, will be heard strongly in Cottrell's new role.

Peter Varney

We need to talk about Africa by Tom Young, Oneworld

I am no expert on Africa – my knowledge is that a layman who has watched over the years as former African colonies gained their independence full of joy and hope, but then sank slowly over the



years into chaos plagued by civil wars and genocide with many of their peoples reduced to abject poverty. This book gives a fascinating insight into the various factors which contributed to this tragic situation and, being packed with factual information, it is difficult to do it justice in a short review. The author outlines the ways in which the West has provided vast sums of aid for development in its former African colonies and how that aid has failed to deliver the prosperity that was sought. We are told how the monies have been misapplied and, if not diverted into the overseas bank accounts of the ruling elites, used to fund armed forces often to wage war on their own people. Attempts to devise strategies to tackle abuse have largely failed because of skilful manipulation by donee governments. Agencies themselves come in for criticism for funding schemes which have not been properly thought through and "turning a blind eye" – in one case accepting a claim for \$23,000 for 18 cups of tea! To avoid the problems of the past, the author argues that aid should be directed towards improving the rail and road network across the continent and increasing the provision of electrical power. This book was written before the current pandemic, one of the consequences of which will be the enormous levels of debt accrued during the "lockdown". There has already been concern expressed in various political circles about the way in which the UK's Aid Budget is used. With budgets at home becoming ever tighter, the Aid budget will attract much more scrutiny. This makes Dr Young's book an important book for laypeople to read if we are to contribute positively to that debate

Nigel Bastin

Solitude Shorts

Hodder Faith is publishing a series of short-form essays on the theme of solitude, with the aim of supporting people during the nationwide lockdown due to the coronavirus.

They will be written by a wide range of Christian voices, published for free online, with encouragement for them to be shared freely.

bit.ly/solitudesshorts

Accord Coalition



The Accord Coalition for Inclusive Education was founded in 2008. We believe the school system too often sustains religious inequality and division, and we campaign for a change in the law which will remove the current rights of faith schools to offer preferential treatment to those of their own faith as opposed to those within their local community. We believe that an Inclusive Education should be available to all our children and young people regardless of the faith, or lack of it, that they or their families profess.

We therefore campaign to remove religious discrimination, both in pupil admissions and in the employment of teachers at state funded faith schools. We also campaign for an inclusive curriculum which teaches the range of beliefs in our society and promotes acceptance of those with protected characteristics. We are ecumenical, uniting a broad range of civil society groups and individuals, as seen above.

Brexit demonstrated that issues we regarded as settled are very far from being so – hate crime rooted in perceptions of others on the grounds of their faith, skin-colour or orientation, has increased exponentially, and populism, both secular and religious, is on the march here and across the world, as at no time since the 1930s.

If we seek both to heal the divisions which have become apparent and to avoid further deterioration in the way we treat and regard each other, an inclusive education which teaches openness, acceptance and tolerance has never been more urgent. Faith schools should be beacons and exemplars of this approach, but too often they are not, most especially in the teaching of Religious Education. This is hardly surprising, since the legislation governing this is largely unchanged since it was first passed 75+ years ago. Things have changed a bit since then, even in the CofE!

The good news is that there have been two substantial pieces of work, which if implemented could go some way to improving the situation. The first is the Report of the Commission on Religious Education, which was published in September 2019 (www.commissiononre.org.uk). This recommended root and branch overhaul of the approach to RE, suggesting the title *Religion and Worldviews* as a better description of the non-preferential and inclusive approach to the subject.

At much the same time, Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, based at Lancaster University, produced *A New Settlement Revised – Religion and Belief in Schools*, which suggests a similar change of emphasis, taking into account the greater diversity present in modern British Society. This suggests a similar renaming of the topic to *Religion, Beliefs and Values*. (www.lancaster.ac.uk/news/75-years-out-of-date-time-to-reform-religion-in-schools)

The bad news for those of us who might regard such thinking as the necessary injection of fresh air into a fusty corner of the educational store cupboard is that the latter appears largely to have disappeared from view since its publication in July 2019, while the Commission's work, published a few months later, was dismissed by Damian Hinds, then Education Secretary, without meaningful comment.

Accord therefore has much to do to achieve the Inclusive Education that we believe is essential for a healthy civil society. If PCN members feel they would like to help us, or want to see more of what we do, please look at our website, consider becoming supporters, and let us know how things look in your neck of the woods.

I end with some words of Rabbi Romain, which sum up well what we are about:

"I want my children to go to a school when they can sit next to a Christian, play football in the break with a Muslim, do homework with a Hindu and walk back with an atheist – interacting with them and them getting to know what a Jewish child is like. Schools should build bridges, not erect barriers."

Our President, and driving force in Accord's foundation, is Rabbi Jonathan Romain, who pastors the Maidenhead Synagogue.

Our Distinguished Supporters include: Professor Jim Al-Khalili, Lord Baker of Dorking, Baroness Blackstone, the Rt Revd David Gillett, Savitri Hensman, Theo Hobson, Hari Kunzru, Fiona Millar, Fiyaz Mughal, Barry Sheerman MP, and Polly Toynbee.

www.accordcoalition.org.uk



Stephen Terry is Chair of the Accord Coalition, a retired priest, and governor at community and faith schools for over 35 years.
stephenterry49@gmail.com

Psalm 23

God is my pathfinder, protector and provider.

**When I open my heart to the divine, the universe and
humanity, I feel I have all I need.**

When it is time to rest, God urges me to stop.

Time to move, I'm urged to follow.

Worn down by life, my spirits are lifted.

**I am shown the safe places to pause, pointed towards the
safe paths to follow, and embraced by overwhelming love
and compassion at every turn.**

**As I am faithful. As I discern. As I crawl, stumble and leap
towards God's ways, glimmers and glimpses of heaven can
appear, reflect and imbue my life and the life of the world.**

**When the sun sets or the storm rolls in, the memory, promise
and hope of God warms my heart.**

**When anxiety shakes my being, when confusion
overwhelms, when illness limits my options, God's presence
stills the storm.**

**A presence I can wait upon, be overcome by, and glimpse in
a loving face; a presence to nudge me, redirect me, calm me
and reassure me.**

**The blessings of life are all around me. Are they mine to
hoard or to share?**

**Are those around me my sisters and brothers, or
competitors?**

**The answer is always love. Love pouring over me, warming
my heart and pouring out through my life.**

**As I crawl, stumble and leap towards God's ways, love, truth,
and compassion follow in my wake. Heaven breaks into my
life and can be glimpsed in the world.**

God is my pathfinder, protector and provider. Amen

David Coaker



**Care for
others**



**Listen to
experts**