

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain



March 2011

Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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A Progressive’s Reluctant Trip to South India ...Some Observations and Reflections

by Sonya Brown



Sonya Brown is a management committee member and curate in St Philip’s parish, Leicester, ordained deacon in July 2010. Previously to training for ordination she worked as a Development Worker for the Southwark diocesan organisation ‘Welcare’. She

enjoys living and learning in the very multi-faith context of Leicester, and is eager to show the world that you can be young, be liberal - and be passionate about faith!

I entered the New Year of 2011 with great trepidation. I had one thing on my mind and that was my forthcoming trip to South India with 23 other clerics, with the objective of spending time with the rapidly growing Church of South India.

As a mildly jittery air traveller, a slowly blooming progressive in my church patch and a reluctant evangelist (of sorts), I was quite honestly dreading spending two weeks with a church whose priority is mass conversion alongside a number of my colleagues who might even try and evangelise to me on the aeroplane! If we got into theological discussion so many feet up, my plan was to clutch Karen Armstrong to my chest as tight as possible, like a knight holding his shield in battle. It wasn’t India that I was scared of, it was two weeks with a pack of Christians that made my heart race!

To top off the progressive’s anxiety my visa had been returned to me three times (the third time the visa office rang me to ask if they could return it to me again!) and a few days before departure I

spent a couple of long hours at the Indian visa office in Birmingham, wondering whether we had lovingly shared bureaucracy as well as ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern’ with our Indian friends, pre 1947 independence. I suppose I was also anxious about how we, a pack of Anglicans, would be received by the Church of South India (CSI) so many centuries on from the first Anglican and Methodist missionaries to arrive in Tamil Nadu.

But, even for a rational, critical but hopeful progressive Christian such as myself, God is still a God of surprises and my adventure turned out to be very different from what I had expected. There is a film, starring Julia Roberts called ‘Eat, Pray, Love’, in which a Western woman goes to India to ‘find herself’ and is enlightened by her experiences there. India is indeed an enlightening place - faith and God are all around you the minute you step out of the aeroplane in colour, smell and atmosphere. Hinduism infiltrates every



Hindu/Christian Holy Trinity – Shantivanam ashram

taken place. Fairy lights surround the altars, saints are framed by incense sticks and neon lights, which reminded me more of the Hindu temples in Leicester rather than cold, dark

aspect of people’s lives, even in the churches, where it is that clear inculturation has

Victorian churches I'm used to.

There was also a sense of ancient faith in India,



The Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, Srirangam

with the history of Jainism and Hinduism present in some of the largest and oldest temples in the world.

It is obvious that people have been thinking and doing God here for a long time but more in the 'mythos' rather than the 'logos' sense, a more Eastern angle on faith which Karen Armstrong explains well in her book 'A Case For God'. The Church of South India was influenced by some big names in missionary circles, such as Christian Friedrich Schwarz (1726 - 1798) and more latterly, Leslie Newbigin (1909 - 1998) and even though the church is now led by predominantly Tamil born people it's clearly still a missionary focussed church. The Trichy diocesan (CSI - Anglican and Methodist church) Bishop, Paul Vasantha-Kumar, told us that current influences on CSI have been liberation, black and feminist theologies. Their present vision is to be a church of liberation both socially and spiritually for those on the margins of society.

One of the priority groups that CSI work with are the Dalits (those who exist outside of the caste system, previously called 'untouchables'). Sometimes these people are also referred to as scavengers in urban areas because they search through rubbish on the streets; CSI run many community development programs with the Dalit people in urban and rural areas, with the aim of assisting them socially, economically and spiritually in their lives.

Although their greatest wish (all the CSI people we met, corporately agreed this) is for Dalits to convert from Hinduism to Christianity, this burning sense of evangelism isn't reflected in the 'sing for your supper' kind of way but more as a gentle suggestion that life as a Christian has more benefits, both socially and spiritually. As someone who felt very uncomfortable with such an emphasis placed on conversion, I saw things slightly differently after meeting one of the eight women clerics in the Trichy diocese. From a low caste background she told us that she had been both socially and spiritually liberated by Christianity. She was now a University chaplain, working towards completing a PhD in the future.

There are issues relating to liberative theologies however that CSI have not yet fully engaged with, including women's ministry and homosexuality. Nearly half of our group were women clergy and we noticed that at times church people who received us would always refer to the men in the group first. We, in reaction to this, spent as much time as we could leading liturgy, preaching etc. The issue of homosexuality is not discussed at all and after having a brief conversation with someone regarding civil partnerships in the UK, the CSI representative was left looking rather perplexed and confused. But, both of these issues are culturally as well as theologically challenging to them at present.

When I asked about atheism, after seeing a sign for 'The World Atheist Conference' (I missed it unfortunately, otherwise I would have gone) plastered on a road side wall, this question was met with an air of perplexity also. In relation to the big 'G' (globalization), which India is at the forefront of along with China, CSI officials stated that this was one of their biggest challenges and even an enemy to their Marxist rooted theology. I wondered how they planned to tackle this giant, when everyone has a mobile phone in India from the goat herder to the Brahmin (upper caste).

There are three words that I would use for my Indian experience and these are: 'Joy, Colour and God'. Everywhere we went there was joy, which particularly shone through the children and young people that welcomed us whenever we walked into their homes in villages, cities, orphanages and hostels. The colour that consumes you when you enter India is amazing and we brought some back with us in Saris that we purchased and in the dozens of scarves that were given to us as gifts wherever we went. God, because even though there didn't seem to be much talk about one another's faith (one woman I spoke to was so shocked that I belonged to a Muslim and Christian women's group back home in Leicester), there were so many signs and symbols pointing towards God, outside of the churches and temples.

As I received ash on my forehead at the top of the Rockfort Hindu temple, it felt the same as participating in the Ash Wednesday service in my own faith tradition. I still participated in the ritual with an ever enquiring mind and the twin sisters of faith and doubt on my shoulders but I realised there, that people had been considering such questions in that place for a long, long time and this gave me a warm Eastern glow inside - maybe it was even the presence of God, who knows?

Sonya Brown

Letter from the chair



In December's letter I informed members that we would be facing a financial deficit for 2010. As I write I am very aware of the wonderful response of so many members who reacted positively and quickly by renewing subscriptions promptly. Many members also have been very generous by adding a donation or increasing their annual subscriptions.

On behalf of the Management Committee I thank all who have responded so

encouragingly and enthusiastically. I also take this opportunity to gently remind members who have yet to renew that January is the official renewal month. Your commitment to PCN Britain is greatly appreciated and your financial support will enable the work to continue to develop around the UK. The Management Committee will devote its May meeting (which will take place immediately after the AGM and afternoon seminars) to review the budgets for 2011 and 2012.

During this year the Management Committee will be updating the database of open progressive churches to help members find a welcoming congregation of similar minds. Some churches offer a welcome but wish to keep news of this

A Box of Words

I have found that most churches in my area don't have any discussion groups at all. Trying to find one to join over the past year has been frustratingly difficult. All there seems to be are the occasional Alpha course and bible studies, and these only in a tiny number of the free churches, mostly Baptist.

This serious dearth of opportunity to discuss questions, doubts, frustrations, difficulties and the Christian response to a multitude of social and moral issues means that many churchgoers have little opportunity to develop a mature faith. This contributes to the mass perception that the Church is irrelevant, out-dated and preoccupied mainly with arguments about the gender or sexual orientation of its ministers.

on "a need to know" basis and are offered the option of revealing their details [via Andy Vivian] only to personal enquirers, in which case such details are not displayed on the website. If you know of a church that you think should be on the open or restricted database do consider asking the ministers / leaders to think about contacting Andy to discuss possibilities.

Please put the AGM date in your diary [Saturday 7th May] and do join us at Bloomsbury Baptist Church, Shaftesbury Avenue, London. As usual we will gather for coffee and registration at 10.30 a.m. and go into the formal business meeting at 11 a.m. This will be followed by two seminars, the first from noon - 1.15 p.m. and the second after lunch from 2 p.m. - 3.15 p.m. The Officers have agreed that the topic of the seminars will be 'Where does Progressive Christianity go from here?' It will be my privilege to introduce the topics but the discussions will involve all who are attending.

Over the past 3 years I have had the opportunity to travel and to speak at PCN Britain groups around the UK and at similar groups in USA and Canada. Additionally I have had the honour of preaching and leading workshops and seminars in various churches and denominations on both sides of the 'Big Pond'. In the process I have gained new insights into where progressive Christianity may be heading and it will be these pointers that I will be sharing with you. What I will give away at this moment is that there is no one direction of possible development! It will be interesting to share our ideas with one another. I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible at the AGM!

John Churcher

Finding no groups to join I kept asking churches to start them. Finally, one vicar agreed to let me run one myself. A bit scary, as I am not really any sort of leader, but one morning I had a flash of inspiration - a box, into which I would place small pieces of paper with words or short phrases written on them. They would be folded like raffle tickets and drawn out by group members and we would all discuss whatever topic emerged. This would relieve me of the burden of leadership, as the box would direct our discussions. I would call the group Wordbox.

All the sessions we have so far had have been stimulating and enjoyable, and the Wordbox idea has worked really well. Anyone can add a word or two to the box at any time, so the group is very

democratic. It is such a simple idea that anyone with a room, a box and a few people keen to talk, can try. It runs itself, it's informal and non-threatening and it's a very good way to bond

people. So, anyone who wants to open up their church to progressive ideas, gently and gradually, introduce the Wordbox!

Carol Williams

Who are we and where are we going?

Duncan Craig, a member of the Edinburgh PCN group and a former member of the Management Committee, opens up an important conversation about belief in God.

I believe in God as a being. To my mind, there is a difference between believing in God as a being and believing in God as an abstract principle. I welcome open thought about the nature of God within either of these categories but cannot get past the division.

In preparing a talk for the Edinburgh group, I have had to think through my own outlook and have also become more aware of the views of others in PCN. I had not realised, and it is my own fault for not reading and listening enough, that both the founder of PCN and the current chair do not share my belief in God as a being, but see God as what I would call an abstract principle. They both combine this with a deep commitment to the "Jesus Way" and to the church.

I should make it clear that I see no merit in disputing anyone's claim to believe in God, however defined. I respect what for convenience I will call the "non-theist" view and the passion with which it is held. But as a basic assumption that differs from mine, it makes discussion less meaningful for me. The questions may be interesting, but are not "live" for me. Of course, my outlook is also decided. But in believing in God as a being, I am not excluding attributes of God as principle. "God is love" goes back a long way.

I had assumed PCN to be about open exploration of Christianity, but now wonder if it is as simple as that. If I were to take a guess, I would say that PCN may be a twin-track organisation, including both those who are exploring without preconceptions and those who have a more decided non-theist outlook. An analogy might be a ramblers' organisation in which the local groups function as walking clubs but the national leadership is focussed on the politics of land access. That may be viable, but I would like to be sure that I understand what the organisation is about.

An objection to this tentative view of PCN would be that it makes a false distinction: we are all exploring, even if some of us have made up our minds about certain questions. However, I would point to David Kemp's article "Father Christmas" in the December 2010 newsletter. He suggests that belief in God as a being is fundamentalist and childish. To label all belief in a divine being as fundamentalist is inaccurate and such misuse of language is liable to make discussion of different

forms of religion more difficult. For David Kemp, open exploration is clearly not what PCN is about: there is a normal course of personal development, which does not allow for arrival at differing viewpoints. That is only one person's approach, but it does take away from the sense of a safe space in which to share and suggests the possibility of the non-theist view developing a harder edge.

I wonder where PCN is going, whether it is heading towards a more pronounced, but narrower view or whether it will continue as a network of open discussion groups. I also now wonder about many of the talks I have heard and discussions I have taken part in. When we talked of God were we meaning different things? Yes, probably, if PCN is about exploration. But if I assumed that "God" meant God as a being, of whatever description, and the other person actually meant God as the principle of, say, sacrificial love, then were we really communicating with each other?

I think it is fair to say that in PCN we seem to be much better at saying what we don't believe, than what we do believe. That is not to say that we don't believe in anything. Passionate concern for truth and justice drives many people and is evident in the literature. But I still have the impression that, on the whole, we are better at talking about what we resist than what we value.

From what I have seen, the PCN demographic follows that of the non-evangelical churches, with the majority of people being in their retirement years. An exception was the audience for the 2010 Marcus Borg conference in Edinburgh, which appeared from my vantage-point to have a broader age range.

The non-theist standpoint at first glance contains some difficulties. Why would I want to go to church to worship an abstract principle? How can I be inspired by Jesus when, if you follow John Churcher's line of thought, we have practically no direct knowledge of Jesus? At best, we have stories made up (or recycled from the Hebrew scriptures) by people who were inspired by Jesus at second or third hand. Belief in God as a being is rejected, although that seems central to Jesus' message in the gospels. It seems an odd combination of elements.

If you read the views of the philosopher Roger Scruton, you find arguments drawn from a bewildering range of philosophical systems and you may wonder what the central point of his philosophy is. The answer is that he believes in the values of the traditional English country gentleman and draws on his wide knowledge of philosophy to

find arguments to support that outlook. In somewhat the same way, I would suggest that the non-theist way may have its centre in the experience of people from a particular background: those who have been in church all their lives and have no wish to leave, and who have a deep attachment to Jesus' ethical teaching, although they have lost belief in the existence of God as a being. Understood from that perspective, the combination of elements is not so odd. However, I am sceptical about the appeal of this way for younger generations who have a different experience.

Perhaps the age profile of PCN goes some way to explaining both the tendency to more easily say what we do not believe than what we do, the non-theist way and the attachment to church attendance (I have met only one person in PCN circles who has ceased going to church). The senior generation has generally been brought up in church, may indeed have served the church in one capacity or another for decades and continues to value it, but is trying to escape from what it sees as outdated doctrines and beliefs. Younger people, very often with no church background, are trying to solve different problems.

For those who have nothing to escape from, there may be more appeal in Borg's positive and gentle re-interpretation of Jesus than the deconstruction work of Spong. Borg's Jesus is, in his different aspects, recognisable in today's world. We have wisdom teachers today, in the form of motivational speakers and newspaper columnists. We have

Happy Days

By Chris Avis

For some time now on a table near my bed has stood a greetings card in 'The interesting thoughts of Edward Monkton' series featuring a basic, comic-like drawing of 'The Pig of Happiness' with the message, 'May his joyful smile remind us how much there is to be HAPPY about'. I was reminded of this when I read the editor's comment in the last newsletter that 'I can't believe I'm the only member of this Network who actually finds much *delight* in being Christian and church...!'

Don't worry, Hugh, there are at least two of us! Here are my own '8 Points' of happiness (in no particular order) in relation to being Christian and the church.

1. I am happy to be living in a time of such turmoil and change for the church, with many exciting developments and communication tools to promote them which never existed before.
2. I am happy to have the privilege of being a founder member of PCN Britain and also to be on the committee of Free To Believe (www.freetobelieve.org.uk).

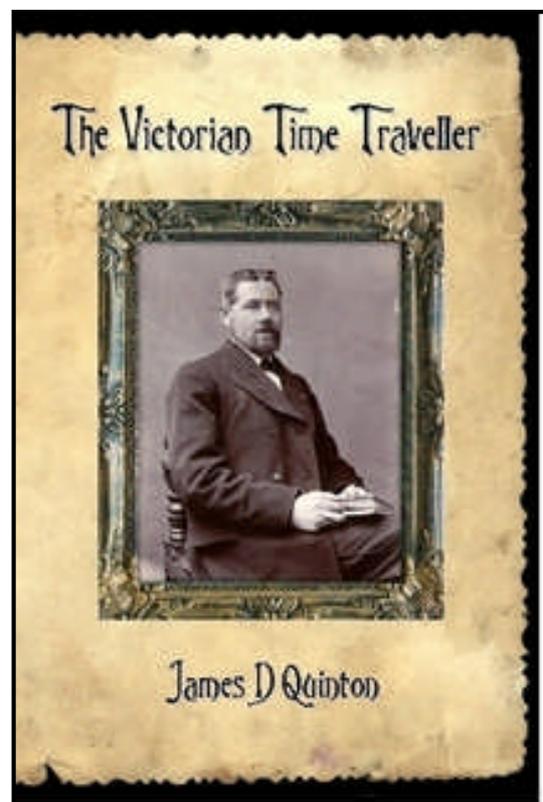
political radicals: think of the uncouth, passionate and astute Irish rock star sharing a press conference with world leaders terrified of what he might say. And there is considerable interest in spirituality.

Similarly, Karen Armstrong may strike a chord with her Charter for Compassion. Effectively, she has taken the Jesus Way and dispensed with the language of God and church to boil it down to its central element. Her idea of compassion does not involve claims of ownership by any faith group and can be shared by those of many defined outlooks as well as those for whom it simply feels right.

PCN is expanding rapidly and is clearly meeting a need. If, as it appears, it is largely confined to the senior of the generations, that takes away nothing from its achievements. Each generation is entitled to seek answers to its own questions even if, in a changing world, those answers do not necessarily satisfy the next generation. What is needed is to try to understand the perspective of younger people who have grown up into a different but co-existent world and to offer them support in their search. And there is a growing body of literature to offer them.

But what I would urge in particular for PCN, as it matures, is greater clarity in recognising where we stand as individuals and communicating that to each other. If we differ in our outlook, we are better to be open about it at an early stage. Perhaps in that respect Marcus Borg, the clearest of teachers, is a good example to follow.

Duncan Craig



**A new book by a network member.
Review on page 14**

3. I am happy to have gained a much deeper and more stimulating understanding of the Bible in recent years from the likes of Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan and Jack Spong (and to have met most of them in person).
4. I am happy to be a member of a progressive church under the ministry of a generous and encouraging leader.
5. I am happy to have been 'in' the church since childhood, even though not appreciating the wealth of my inheritance until much later in my life.

Another fresh expression?

By Richard Tetlow



Richard Tetlow was vicar of the inner-city parish of Ladywood in Birmingham from 1989 until he retired in 2008. He lived and worked in the city before that, and still does. Before ordination he taught and practised community work in

Southwark, South London. He and his wife Ruth are members of Birmingham's Council of Faiths. The greatest challenge to our generation in Britain is a new gift of God: a new world of people of many faiths living 'face to face and side by side'.* Faith is now added to previous population changes of race, colour and culture. To such challenges the response of Jesus Christ himself was largely to include strangers with the commandment for all "to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves". So it is still, for many in the country, including many immigrants now included as British citizens. Globalisation gives Britain a wealth of world faiths in its midst, Birmingham being especially blessed in this way. Accordingly, it stimulates our world society and governments to a new and increasingly urgent imperative: to strive for good 'inter faith relationships' for the sake of world harmony and peace. It is a pivotal time in history. Particularly significant are relationships between Muslims and Christians of Britain. This is the crux of this article. In February 2011 there were various public events that sent new alarm bells: A BBC documentary on 'Geert Wilders', the far right Dutch politician, which gave disturbing evidence of what he says is the Islamicisation of Europe. Two BBC radio 4 programmes entitled 'Driving on the right'. Both described the right wing anti immigration, anti-'immigrants' and especially anti-Islamic political and social tendencies in Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Germany of organisations like the Danish People's Party and the Freedom Party in Austria. Both voiced the ambition of these far right wing movements to create a united opposition

6. I am happy to be living in the internet age, enjoying the benefits of fast communication and dialogue.
7. I am happy that English Language was one of my few successful subjects at school, enabling me now to articulate my thoughts on paper.
8. I am happy to have found happiness within myself, with no fear of death or what may follow. Most human theological constructions are fun but not fundamental in my life.

If I can ever live out the Golden Rule, my happiness will be complete.

throughout Europe to the assumed increasing presence and power of Islam. At the same time a march in the UK of the anti-Islamic English Defence League (EDL) in Luton coincided with the Prime Minister, David Cameron, attacking 'multiculturalism', giving it no agreed definition and associating it with anti-Britishness and even terrorism, assumed to be Islamic.

What is to be the response of British people to calls for us to unite across Britain with the European far right? Great changes create great demands. Politicians, statisticians, lawyers, educationalists will play their part, ordinary, decent, sensible people will live and let live. What should be the response of the different British faith communities? Different faiths, including Muslims themselves, must respond in their own way, together and separately. What should be the response of Christians?

I suggest five ways which I believe Christians and Christianity have to offer for our potentially dangerous situation:

- to aim for and practise mutual friendship;
- to act together across the faiths for justice and peace;
- to recognise the negative barriers Christianity may present to Islam;
- to motivate themselves, by prayer, discussion and action against these barriers;
- to consider making changes or even sacrifices of certain beliefs that Muslims would appreciate and respect.

Mutual friendship between Muslims and Christians, if possible through sharing theology too, is vital. Such friendship already exists at many levels from bhaji sharing to joint meetings and public solidarity. However it is my long experience that Christian 'friendship' is often presented with one hand tied behind the back: friendship on condition. In the end it is either still held that Christianity is superior – Christianity after all has, it is said, 'the Son of God' – or its aim is conversion of the other. This may be honest opinion but throughout all faiths friendship and marriage are God's gift and show neither approach is acceptable or successful. My wife is the best for me. I do not see her as superior to

everyone else except as my choice. It is the love from God that is supreme. Similarly, faith identities are to be fully respected, shared and encouraged. Claims of superiority either way can reach impasse. Mutual friendship achieves both honest, open and non-power-stricken inter faith relationships

Christians working together with Muslims for justice and peace is a great achievement. The Multi-Faith Project of the Jubilee Debt Campaign and Religions for Peace working for an international Arms Treaty are two fine practical examples that include Muslims and Christians. Such common causes may be on different levels: contrast a joint clergy /imam cricket match and a march against the EDL. Another level was the recent PCN Britain conference for Christians in Birmingham addressed by Christian, Muslim and Jewish speakers. The theme was "Reclaiming Radical Faith through the presentation of a radical Christian faith, a radical Islamic faith and a radical Jewish faith" ('progressive' would have been a better word). Feedback comments ranged from 'electric' to 'wonderfully hopeful'. Many amongst the near 50 present saw the need to seek justice together and witnessed 'true faith in God' from our Muslim and Jewish speakers in and yet also beyond each faith.

Christianity's greatest negative barrier towards many faiths, especially Islam, is the difficulty of Christians seeing the world through the eyes of inbuilt power over others, acquired, held and retained over centuries, which they easily take for granted. Often it has not been and is not recognised as such. The powerful often fail to, the powerless usually do. Political imbalance of power to the presumed advantage of Christianity has been vast over centuries : from its adoption as the Roman Empire's religion in the 4th century by Emperor Constantine to the British Empire acquiring the old Ottoman Middle East in the 20th 'Christianity' has too often accompanied physical power. Confused consequences of empire have been racial, colour and faith attitudes of superiority, power and pride alongside their underbelly, assumed inferiority, subjugation and dehumanisation, both shamefully denying Christ's Way.

Renewed awareness of such negative barriers is necessary for fresh motivation to further dismantle them. It is hard to acquire and needs face-to-face meeting, forbearance, prayer, generosity and love on both sides. The shining example of the South

Challenging the government

Michael Wright, convenor of the Tees Valley and North East England, suggests that our times require of progressive believers action on the application of the gospel rather than theological navel-gazing, and shares a statement initiated by faith groups and other concerned people in his own local area.

African 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' that attempted to foster forgiveness and reparation amongst black and white within apartheid Christian South Africa is not easily replicated with similar awareness, integrity and surrender of power. It remains a model of Christian practice.

It is a faithful question to ask what matters of faith Christians with Muslims might explore to improve Christian/Muslim relationships? What might true generosity and friendship bring in Christ's name? The 4th century concepts of 'The Trinity' and 'the Son of God' stand for 'three persons in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit', and 'Christ, equal to God, human and divine'. 'Traditionalists' see them as duly mysterious, the crux of worship and divine authority. 'Progressives', using different insight, see them as unduly mysterious and confusing. There have long been differing interpretations of Christianity by Christians! They choose rather to emphasize God as creator and sustainer of all humanity, worshipped by Jesus according to the gospels, uniquely demonstrated by him within human limits with 'His Son' Jesus' Way of love as supreme priority for Christian life.

Difficulty with the concepts of 'the Trinity' and the 'divinity of Jesus Christ' have not eased Jewish/Christian history and in present times can prove troublesome to Christian/Muslim relations. What might Christians now contribute regarding faith to improving such relations? The need is strong, as I experience myself, and could easily become severe. Maybe it could stir Christians, for the sake of advancing a truly peaceful and godly country to reconsider clarification, expression and meaning of the concepts? Such a move would cause healthy varying reactions. The task is for those so called. Further honest discussion may well discover God's will afresh for our age for both Muslim and Christian communities. It could lead to proposals of sacrifice on both sides - a principle known to both Islam and Christianity- and a new richness of faith and acceptance of differences. All this could be an invaluable international model for interfaith relations. Indeed, another fresh expression? We should not fear that God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can stand alone!

** Face to face and side by side: a framework for partnership in our multi-faith society' published by the Government's Dept for 'Community and Local Government', July 2008*

I hope we Progressive Christians will not get so pre-occupied with the delights of Spang, Borg and Armstrong, and our own theological reflections, that we lose sight of a key element of Christian life – the application of our values to current affairs.

Middlesbrough has been designated the Local Authority area least likely to be cope with the

consequences of the financial cutbacks in the government's programme. Some of us are involved in gathering a coalition of many interest groups, to argue a coherent case to the government, asking them to realise the full implications of some of their strategies, and choose a different way forward. The statement below is the current state of a brief statement, for which agreement will be sought in the faith communities and voluntary sector – not just in Middlesbrough, but much more widely.

Statement on spending cuts

The government insists it has to cut its spending, because we have been living beyond our means for years. Economists and politicians argue about the speed and selection of these cuts, and whether they will help or harm our economy.

We brace ourselves for the consequences of their policy.

Public reaction has caused the government to rethink its plan to sell the woodlands of England. Now we want them to rethink the way they intend to apply their cuts, to share the pain more fairly. Their present plans have many elements that are not fair.

Areas of Britain with the highest levels of deprivation and unemployment, the lowest life expectancy, the fewest skills and job opportunities, the lowest level of community volunteering, and the poorest housing, face the highest percentage of cuts.

The faith traditions of the Book – Christian, Jewish, Muslim - which have shaped the values of the

people of Britain, have always sought to apply principles of ethics and social justice to national decision-making. They have a centuries-old bias to help (rather than hinder) the poor.

We recognise that the aim of much the government is trying to do – to live within our means, to help people move from dependency into work, to reduce frivolous and wasteful expenditure, and to enable people to make decisions locally that affect their lives and well-being, aims to do that.

However we believe the pace is too fast, the effect on the poorest areas will be devastating, and much good work currently done by charities and voluntary organisations will be destroyed. If that happens, the long-term social consequences will be profound, divisive and destructive.

We ask the government to urgently address:

1. The vast amounts of tax avoidance not only in Britain, but in many tax havens which are British dependencies;
2. The academic studies (like that from Professor Tomoney of Newcastle University's Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies) which clearly demonstrate inbuilt and possibly unintended consequences of the Local Government Financial settlement;

And to engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are expressing concerns about the implications of the way the cuts are being applied, and listen to our concerns and recommendations.

Michael Wright

News from local groups

Aberdeen

(Joan MacDonald 01224 311093
joan.macdonald@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our recently formed Aberdeen Group of PCN Britain has had its third meeting, when a mixed group of clergy and lay people started to look at and discuss "Living the Questions 2".

We will use the next session of this study at our February 22nd meeting, also held in the University Chaplaincy Centre, and we hope to continue with this DVD course, along with discussion, in the ensuing months.

The word is spreading, and already our meetings have included people from the Scottish Episcopal, Baptist, Quaker, Roman Catholic, Church of Scotland and United Reformed Church traditions.

Coventry and Warwickshire (meeting in Rugby)

(Nicola Phelan 01788 562562
nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

In December about fifteen of us had a meal at a temporary restaurant in Rugby that opens each year to raise funds for a project in India. It is run by an energetic and inspiring woman from one of the local

churches. We had a lovely meal and social time and were inspired by this example of faith in action. In January we all shared things that had been meaningful in the past year which included personal stories of birth, bereavement and changing health that had led to new understandings and others shared insights from conferences and reading. Poems and some helpful liturgy and reflection added to this supportive evening. At least two people said the gathering had given them new energy after difficult church meetings. We have just had our February meeting and learnt about the Alexander technique from one member who has incorporated it into his daily life particularly in relation to teaching singing and music. As often is the case we could have done with more time but did have some practice. A small group of us have formed a reading group and will meet shortly to discuss the first book about Benedictine spirituality. The next main meeting is on 10/3/11 and the topic is Mysticism and contemporary spirituality which will use the CRC conference as a starting point.

Edinburgh

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

For the first time ever we had to cancel our planned meetings for November and December, due to last year's exceptional snowfalls, but our intended speakers have promised to come next session instead, which sugared the pill a little....

In January, one of our members, Duncan Craig, spoke about his own faith journey, in a talk with the intriguing title 'Hiding among the giant cabbages' - a reference to his interest in and involvement with the Findhorn community. This was followed by a lively discussion!

Still to come at time of writing are:

Mon 28th Feb –The Art of Haiku – with John Stuart and Bill Goodburn

Mon 14th March - Prayer and Liturgy –what are we doing?

Mon 28th March -'Whither Progressive Christianity?

Mon 11th April – Welcome to the Upper Room (a meal with a difference!)

Mon 30th May – Tim Maguire from the Humanist Society

Mon 27th June – Looking forward and looking back – evaluation and planning...

As always, everyone is welcome. Meetings are stand-alone, so if you can't come regularly then do come when you can!

We meet in the Cluny Centre on Braid Road, which has on-street parking, and is also accessible by bus to Morningside Station. Meetings are (usually) on the last Monday of the month, beginning at 7.30 and finishing at 9.30 p.m.

Exeter

(Liz Vizard 01392 668859
liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We have had two excellent meetings to start the new year: In January we had a very unusual session in our 'Pearl of Great Price' series with a visiting speaker, Viannah Rain, a Wiccan Priestess from the Pagan Federation. She shared her insights about spiritual life and possibly typified the younger generation's search for alternative approaches. Viannah showed us several precious items used in rituals, and extracts of their own written guide, added to and developed by each new priestess.

In February Chris Avis led a very helpful session with extracts from Marcus Borg's Edinburgh lectures. As a group we find his approach very congenial: 'warm' and gentle are words often used about him and he lacks the dogmatism found in some other theologians. We enthusiastically recommend the CDs of his lectures to any who haven't yet had this pleasure.

At our next meeting on Sunday 20th March Adrian Hough will talk about his book "The flaw in the universe: natural disaster and human sin", which was published in 2010. Adrian has degrees in science and theology from Oxford University. After some years doing scientific research, he trained for ordination in the Church of England and is now chaplain to the Bishop of Exeter.

On April 10th we start the 12 DVD series Saving Jesus Redux, borrowed from the PCN library. Further dates for these will be agreed at that meeting.

On June 26th we welcome John Churcher, Chair of PCN Britain who will be preaching at Southernhay URC that morning (all invited!) and will speak in the afternoon about his book 'Setting Jesus Free'.

All are welcome to our meetings in the URC Southernhay Church hall Exeter 2.30 - 4.30.

Gloucester

(Frank Godfrey 01452 533825
frank.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After a Christmas celebration in which we shared readings we had found helpful we then went on to complete the Brueggemann DVD, "Countering Pharaoh's Production-Consumption Society Today" He neatly describes the Sinai Covenant as a 'regime change' from living under the rule of Pharaoh to living under the rule of God. The first three commandments imply that we are not God, and that we can neither do God any favours, nor use him for our own church or party purposes. The remaining seven Sinai commandments focus on the priority of creating neighbourhood. in contrast to the Pharaonic priority of increasing personal and commercial profit, a priority which can become destructive of good neighbourliness.

We found it difficult to recognise the Sinai pattern in present Israeli policy in Palestine, but found encouragement in the recognition of concern for neighbourhood in the formation of organizations like the United Nations, and in the widespread and growing concern that poor countries should be given far more help. Of course the ten commandments pose personal questions: "Under which authority do we ourselves live..." and "Does our lifestyle create neighbourhood?"

Five of us attended the Ladywood conference and found it helpful.

We plan to use the PCN workbooks in our next sessions with particular interest in the theme of *What do we tell our children?*

We usually meet the first Saturday afternoon in the month.

Hampshire

(Martin Godfrey 023 8076 6312
martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Four of our monthly groups continue to meet. The A27 Book Club is currently reading *Together in Hope*; the Alton Group has recently been considering the much more controversial book *The Spirit Level* by sociologists Wilkinson and Pickett; the Southsea Group has been listening to CDs of the talks by Marcus Borg at Edinburgh; and the Chandler's Ford / Winchester Open Spirituality Group has been reflecting on contemporary Christmas hymns, God, and Beauty.

The fifth group, the Solent Coast Group, is in resting mode. The possibility of separate groups, one in the Lymington area and one in the Christchurch area is being explored. Please contact me if you live in those parts and might be interested. A local group of the Scientific and Medical Network meets monthly in New Milton for discussions of ethical and spiritual issues. Seven in the Hampshire Hub (a network of

people in and around Hampshire who are interested in the non-dogmatic exploration of religious faith and spirituality) attend regularly alongside an approximately equal number of others. Our quarterly newsletter advertises a selection of local, regional and national events organised by other bodies that may be of interest to those in the Hub. Please let me know if you would like to be added to the circulation list. There is no charge.

Hertfordshire

(Diana Reddaway
diana.reddaway@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The venue continues to be The Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City AL8 6TA. All meetings take place on the third Sunday afternoon of the month, beginning at 4.00 p.m. and concluding with light refreshments at 5.00 p.m. So far this year meetings have centred on 'The Imam and the Pastor' dealing with the cooperation between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria in January, and Mary Magdala ('Mary the Great One' rather than Mary of Magdala in February. The March meeting is on Buddhism in Bhutan. The summer programme is not yet complete but Diana Reddaway will lead us into discussing "God Dancing" on 19th June. Subjects for May 15th and July 17th to be confirmed.

Hickling, Norfolk Broads

(Merrie Longbottom 01692 598844
merrie.longbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Four of us have been meeting together for two years, exploring progressive Christianity. Last year, another joined our group, and then another one about 5 months ago. We've since had several enquiries from the PCN website about visiting our group. We're now at the stage where we know there are other interested parties out there and are wrestling with the question of 'where do we go from here?'. We are all at different stages on our 'journey' but are enjoying the company and encouragement we are finding from dvds, books, articles, etc. It's been wonderful to find like-minded people who can say, "What we do is more important than what we believe" and to discover that there are alternative ways of seeing, believing and living out our faith. We meet weekly on Thursdays at 2pm and would be more than happy to include you in our journeying.

Leeds, Yorkshire

(Sandra Griffiths 0113 258 2652
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Leeds Group meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church Centre (LS7 4NB) usually on the second Saturday of the month, with coffee/tea available from 9.30, between 10 and 12.

On 12th March those who couldn't make the January meeting - "Looking at the interface between religions" - will have another chance to participate in this topic, and those who were there will have the chance to explore it further.

At the February meeting the date of the April meeting was revisited: by popular demand, and realising that the 16th would clash with a CRC conference in Sheffield, we are going to revert to the second

Saturday of the month, namely the 9th. The following two meetings will be on 14th May and 11th June.

Topics have yet to be decided, but on one of these dates we will be listening to Borg's second main lecture at the Edinburgh conference in September. Our fortnightly Monday evening meetings, Questers, continue to take place at the home of one of our members in Roundhay (further details on request). We are always pleased to see regulars, occasional visitors and newcomers alike, and both groups contain all such.

Please contact me for further information or directions to any of our meetings. It might be possible to arrange a lift too.

London Richmond

(Alan Powell 020 8878 7355
alan.powell@pcnbritain.org.uk)

At its last two meetings, the Group discussed sermons by Richard Holloway, extracted from the Radical Faith website. The next meeting is on Saturday 5 March, when the Group will be listening to a CD of Marcus Borg's sermon at the PCN Edinburgh Conference. Further meetings (topics as yet undecided) are planned for the afternoons of Saturday 2nd April and Saturday 4th June.

The Group is now growing beyond its original Mortlake with East Sheen and has five members from other parts of South West London. Please contact Alan Powell for further information.

Manchester

(John Ramsbottom 0161 456 5119
john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After a short break for Christmas, we resumed our meetings in January. The spring sessions the year will be based around the DVD course "Countering Pharaoh" which is produced by Living the Questions people and features the prominent Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. The course is fairly short, comprising only 5 sessions and should give a different perspective on the Christian heritage from its Hebrew roots. As Brueggemann says: "It is a journey from slavery to covenant that we keep making over and over again.... because Pharaoh has immense power always to draw us back into slavery." This message has a relevance to us when we face modern day Pharaohs.

We now have a new venue: Heaton Moor United church, Stanley Rd, Heaton Moor, Stockport SK4 4HL. Meeting dates planned are March 23rd, April 27th, and May 25th. All meetings begin at 7:30 pm and last for about one and a half hours. Anyone interested will be most welcome to join us.

Newbury

(Maria Grace 01635 47196
maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Newbury group is alive and well! Due to the fact that some new people have joined us, we re-started the 'Living the Questions' course that the group had embarked on. We are taking the opportunity of this course to throw the net wider and looking forward to getting into the course. At the moment we meet alternately on Tuesday evenings and Friday daytime

every 2 weeks. In June we look forward to welcoming John Churcher to speak to the group.

North Lincolnshire

(John Sharp 01472509857
john.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group has just finished working through "Eternal Life" by Bishop Spong. Interestingly, there was little discussion about life after death. Most members were convinced by Spong's argument that there could be little known about a life after death and, therefore, there was not much point in talking about it. There was, however, vigorous discussion about his conception of the divine. This is leading us to consider in greater depth different understandings and visualisations of divinity. We are joining with our sister organisation in Lincoln for a discussion with a local, and much respected, Anglican priest who has agreed to lead us into a discussion on the subject. Until then, we shall be using as stimulus material the talks given by Marcus Borg at Edinburgh on the topic of being Christian in the twenty-first century. New members are always welcome.

Nottingham

(David Turner 0115 976 4909
david.turner@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Nottingham group has been in existence for some years and though the number attending meetings is usually between 5 and 10 we have a much larger number of contacts - some who can't manage a particular gathering, or are no longer physically able to come or have moved away but all want to keep in touch and are committed to the PCN ethos.

We usually meet on the second Saturday of each month at 10am for 10.30am finishing about 12.30pm with lunch we have brought with us. We meet at the Sherwood United Reformed Church, Edwards Lane, Nottingham which has plenty of parking space and is well supplied by bus services.

March 12th Relationships in a Post Christian Society part 2, led by one of our members.

April 9th Continuing discussion based on the CDs of Marcus Borg's lectures 'Christology, The Cross and Easter.

Oxford and Abingdon

(Bobbie Stormont 01865 358364
bobbie.stormont@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Oxford and Abingdon Group has been meeting since June 2010. We number 12 or so and get together on the first Tuesday of the month, meeting at 7.30pm in group members homes. We are enjoying using Living the Questions as the focus for our discussions at present but often these go beyond what the material suggests. The membership of the group includes both members of PCN and others who value the opportunity for open discussion. We would welcome other people to join our discussions, contact Bobbie Stormont as above to learn where the meeting will be held.

Stoke on Trent

(Ian Gregory 01782 614407
ian.gregory@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Stoke on Trent group has settled on a programme for 2011 which tries to link faith with some practical issues. We started with the way Christianity has influenced politics over the centuries. We will be going on to prison reform, the media, the value of pubs, parenting and, at the end of the year, the Bible's preoccupation with angels.

We are pleased to be taking part in calm discussions about the unfolding development of Christianity. What a theme! Planned meetings for the period of this newsletter are: April 3rd Multi-faith understanding with Rana Tufail; May 8th Prison reform with Fred Hughes; June 6th Human equality with a speaker from the Jubilee Centre, Cambridge; July 3rd Understanding the Bible using Keith Ward's *The Word of God*.

Tees Valley & North East England

(Michael Wright 01642 851919
Michael.wright@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group that meets at Middlesbrough Quaker Meeting House each month is working our way through Karen Armstrong's "The Case for God". We are finding it more satisfying to work at such a book chapter at a time, rather than trying to reflect on the whole book in one or two sessions.

We meet for a couple of hours - usually on the 2nd Tuesday of each month at 2.30.p.m. but for April we will choose a different day when we meet on March 8th as I shall be on holiday during the part of April. We might jump to May - it is in the hands of the group. We come from different denominations, and a geographical range from Sunderland to Skelton in North Yorkshire.

The Library at the Quaker Meeting House is well stocked with reading material, including up to date books by Spong, Borg, Crossan, Armstrong and others. People who are not Quakers are welcome to borrow them.

I am also involved in stimulating people in the churches and other faith communities to articulate a case for fairness and justice to the government in response to their economic programme. In this I am part of a team working with our elected Mayor.

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims

(Pat Churchill 01892531541
pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org)

Everyone is welcome to our meetings which are generally on the last Thursday of the month. (do ring me to check time and venue). We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course.

Our first meeting in January was a planning meeting at which we discussed the programme and ideas for a day event later in the year. Later in the month we looked at the study "Christ in us today" produced by CANA with a great deal of input from Adrian Smith and available free to download

(christiansawakening.org). In particular we looked at "The Christ in us" and spent most of the time reading and re-reading the passage aloud without trying to delve into the meaning of phrases and individual words, a method of study that worked well for us.

The February meeting in early March will be watching a video which gives a real feel for Celtic Christianity

made by John O'Donohue, who many will know from Greenbelt, shortly before he died. Dates of meetings before the summer are Thursdays 31st March (practical Christianity), 5th May (Spirituality), 26th May, 23rd June and 21st July.

West of Scotland

(Chris Vermeulen 0141 6383604
chris.vermeulen@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The West of Scotland is still in the early stage of development and establishing various small groups. At Orchardhill in Giffnock, Glasgow we have four groups all of which have done Living the Questions and continue to meet around various topics like Bishop John Shelby Spong's "Jesus for the Non-Religious" and Walter Brueggemann's "Countering Pharaoh's Production-Consumption Society Today". Meetings take place every two weeks. We will be starting two new groups in September 2011. For details on all our meetings check the PCN Britain website or contact us at conference@orchardhill.org.uk.

At Cairns, Milngavie we have two newly formed Living the Questions Groups and we have the monthly "Thinking Allowed" lecture series. See www.cairnschurch.org.uk for details. We have a ministers meeting that meets every six weeks or so and if you want information please

contact Rev. Andrew Frater at cairnschurch@btinternet.com.

On 4th March we will be having a talk at Orchardhill by Mark Vernon entitled "After Atheism". The big event in our area is the visit of Bishop Jack Spong from 2nd to 5th June. To reserve tickets please contact us at conference@orchardhill.org.uk.

Woodbridge Group

(Julie Mansfield 01394 384370
julie.mansfield@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Well, we're finally getting down to business! We have discussed the eight points, although not in any great depth. And at our last meeting we gave serious consideration to John Churcher's Open Communion Service. Generally, the group like it a lot, though there were several comments that all the capital letters made it feel a bit too 'New-Agey'. For my part, I wish it had a more radical, grounded, purposeful feel to it. This brings me on to Sam Alexander's version of The Lord's Prayer within the Open Communion Service. We all had difficulty with that as we did not see any resemblance to The Lord's Prayer (in its various versions) with which we are familiar. This new version seems to have lost all of the original's kingdom purpose. We would love to know what others think.

Events to come

PCN Britain's 2011 AGM and Seminar

Where does progressive Christianity go from here?

Saturday 7th May, 2011, 11.00am at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church,
235 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2H 8EP

Keynote speaker: Revd John Churcher, chair of PCN Britain

This is a day conference consisting of a short AGM followed by two seminar sessions. There will be plenty of chance for all to take part in discussions. At a time when PCN Britain is thinking about its strategy for the next three years, this is a chance for members and sympathisers alike to think more widely about the role that progressive Christianity is playing and perhaps should play. Registration and coffee is from 10.30 am and we go into the formal business meeting at 11am. This will be followed by the two seminars, the first from

noon and the second from 2 pm, ending at around 3.15pm. Bring your own packed lunch. Drinks provided.

If you plan to attend please contact andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk. The event is open to all who are interested, not just PCN Britain members. There will be a collection to cover the cost of hiring the hall.

The church is at the top end of Shaftesbury Avenue, close to New Oxford Street. The nearest tube station is Tottenham Court Road.

Bishop Jack Spong A New Christianity for a New World

Orchardhill Parish Church, Giffnock, Glasgow – Friday 3rd to Sunday 5th June, 2011.

Bishop Jack has been a real friend to PCN Britain since the network's beginnings (indeed from before we formally began) and this very special weekend of four lectures is being jointly organised by PCN Britain and by the recently established West of Scotland hub of the network. Full details are in the flier inside this newsletter. Starting on the Friday evening Jack will be preaching on *God beyond Theism, Jesus – Why Saviour is no longer the proper*

title, Seeking Divinity through Humanity and The Call of the Spirit to a New Humanity. In addition he'll be preaching at the 10.30 service at the Parish Church. The cost to the public for the weekend is £35, which includes a finger buffet lunch on the Saturday. For paid up members of PCN, however, and also of CRC it is just £30. A not to be missed opportunity to hear this champion of progressive faith understanding and living.

John Dominic Crossan **What the Gospels really teach about the birth and death of Jesus**

St Andrew's URC, Roundhay, Leeds - Friday 16th – Sunday 18th September

A flier enclosed in this newsletter gives full details of a very special 'long weekend' conference organised by PCN Britain at which John Dominic Crossan, a distinguished leading figure in the will be speaking to the subject "What the Gospels really teach about the birth and death of Jesus." This is a unique and rare opportunity to hear Crossan speaking in this country. Conference numbers are

limited to just 200 – there are still tickets, but book now before they all go.

The cost to the public for the Friday lecture is £7, and for the three lectures on Saturday £22, but for PCN members the prices are reduced to £6 and £18. On Sunday 18th there is an act of worship at St Andrew's, Roundhay at 10.30 am at which John Dominic will preach on the Lord's Prayer, the subject of his most recent book.

Putting people up for events

A London member of the network is offering free accommodation for the Friday and Saturday nights around the AGM. There have also been two offers of accommodation for singles or couples in the Roundhay area of Leeds for the Crossan weekend,

for any for whom the cost of accommodation is discouraging them from going. Contact Andy Vivian – details on back page, about this. And if anyone else feels able to *offer* accommodation, let Andy know as soon as possible.

And next year

Beyond Our Wildest Imagining - making real the love of God

The 'Free To Believe' conference at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire from 12th to 14th April 2012 promises (says Chris Avis) to be the best yet. Guest speakers will be Bishop Gene Robinson and the Revd Dr David Peel; Kate Compston is the worship leader and poet in residence, Elizabeth Gray-King the artist in residence. Early booking is strongly recommended. Download an application form from www.freetobelieve.org.uk or write to Mrs Linda Harrison, Conference Bookings, 52 Salisbury Avenue, COLCHESTER, Essex, CO3 3DN.

Together in Hope – the sequel

In 2008 PCN Britain met with a number of Christian organisations to set out a vision of an inclusive, forward-thinking, justice-loving, love-proclaiming Church following the person of Jesus of Nazareth. One outcome of these meetings was the small book, *Together in Hope*, a collection of short essays outlining a landscape for the Christian faith.

Together in Hope sold well and was a sign of how valuable such resources are to people in churches and groups who yearn for a Church fit for the 21st century. From that experience has grown another piece of collaboration, this time between PCN Britain, Modern Church, St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield and Free to Believe.

Using the banner, **Together in Hope - Resources for Christian Faith Today**, the group is producing a series of short resource books for people who desire to be encouraged and fed in their Christian journey.

The first two books, **Walk the Jesus Walk** and **Jesus Then and Now** are by the same author John Simmonds, who convenes PCN groups in Sheffield and Chesterfield.

Walk the Jesus Walk is reviewed on page 14 of this newsletter. **Jesus - Then and Now** is for those who want to dig deeper into the historical account and contemporary relevance of Jesus' message.

We hope that both books will be seen as complementary and a useful source of study for individuals and groups. They are priced at £2.95 (plus £1 postage) and can be bought from the PCN office at 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB or via our website www.pcnbritain.org.uk Another book in the pipeline is about how people today can be helped by the Christmas stories in the gospels, written by Adrian Alker.

This venture is not only collaborative between organisations (liberals can work together!) but we also hope that people 'out there' might feel able themselves to contribute to the series either in offering a chapter on a chosen theme or indeed a whole book. The present convenor of the *Together in Hope* group is Adrian Alker and you can email Adrian on togetherinhope.editor@gmail.com.

Book reviews

The Victorian Time Traveller by James D Quinton

Xplosive Books 2010. PB 325pp. ISBN 978-0-9567823-0-4 £9.95. Available to order online and from bookshops

Reviewed by Iszy Baker

From the moment you open this book its agenda is clear. Five quotes greet the reader, including citations from the late great American comedian Bill Hicks and Gandhi, purporting the values of love, human unity and respect for differing opinions, and these ethos are at the very core of the novel.

It begins with a forward from the writer, a piece of meta-fiction that places him in this speculative fiction novel; the book combines science fantasy/fiction and pre-apocalyptic dystopia. Paraphrasing, Quinton claims he “found the manuscript eighteen months ago in his then recently deceased great aunt’s house”. What follows is an account written in 1900 by his great, great uncle, the Victorian Time Traveller of the title, to the wife he left behind. The Victorian Time Traveller witnesses a future (the end of the 21st century) where religion is derided and anti-theism is predominant. It’s also where he meets a man in a bar who tells the Time Traveller his own story.

The man drowning his sorrows is Daniel Ramsey, an enigmatic character who has been running away from his past and, without giving too much away, trying to avoid a future he was born to play a major role in. Dan’s recollections along with the Time Traveller’s own dispatches that detail his shock and sadness on the demise of humanity, which crop up every so often, along with his fleshing out of Dan’s narrative, are central.

The book has both feet firmly in the Book of Revelation, and includes many rudiments that fundamentalist Christians get excited over. This seems a deliberate, almost tongue in cheek gesture from the author, defying books like the ‘Left Behind’ series; indeed The Victorian Time Traveller is the antithesis to those type of books and the literal beliefs they support.

The core story revolves around the devil’s attempts to pervert the prophesy of John and “bring hell to Earth”. The character of the antichrist is obviously Richard Dawkins-esque “he was a leading figure in the anti-theist movement, regularly appearing on multi-media interfaces lambasting faith in all its forms.”

Dan, through a series of providential events, meets Catherine, a Today Christian, and a pivotal member of a community called Beacon “a new movement blessed by God”, brought into being to help “nurture

believers through an impending tribulation”, they have almost 144,000 members. Dan, a man born to serve the darkness, finds himself protecting the leaders of the group when he falls in love with Catherine and when they find themselves being picked off one by one in a manner akin to the Terminator film series.

A difficult novel to sum up in a concise review, I found that the book benefited from more than one read; carefully constructed and researched, there is a lot to pick up on. It is certainly a novel that you will need to digest slowly.

Quinton has a short, sharp, engaging writing style and doesn’t waste time on longwinded descriptions preferring to leave the reader to use their imagination.

The opinions promoted within are, whilst widely held, often drowned out by more intolerant voices. The Time Traveller writes of the Today Christians “the essence of their movement was to seek greater clarity by revisiting the original biblical texts, re-examining the traditional translations, offer historical, metaphorical and literal explanations and balance scripture with the times it was originally written, so as to apply the contents to everyday life: facts and faith.” This will know doubt spark debate between Christian denominations and the clear, and I don’t think it’s too strong a word, attacks, on anti-theism that Quinton throws in, might have him incurring the wrath of Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and co.

Enjoyable, ambitious, a little off the wall and often hard to put down, The Victorian Time Traveller is, I believe, the first fiction book to promote liberal Christianity and the importance of incorporating and listening to other religious voices. It may suffer from being a little ahead of its time, but hopefully it will receive the support it deserves from likeminded individuals, because the core ideals and open thinking seem, to this reviewer at least, to be the correct direction for those with a religious conviction to move in.

Iszy Baker is thirty-nine years old and lives in Bedfordshire. She has been a drug rehabilitation worker for sixteen years. When time allows, Iszy contributes reviews on the arts to various local and national newspapers and magazines.

Walk the Jesus Walk by John Simmonds:

St Mark’s Press, 2011. ISBN 9780190527846. 36 pp. £2.95.

Reviewed by Robin Story

This attractive book, the second in the Together in Hope series, aims to be a six part programme for those who wish to explore what it means to live in the way of Jesus in the 21st Century. Its target is “those individuals and groups, inside and outside

the Church, who are exploring matters of faith and belief.” The author is convinced that “the real Jesus has been taken away from us, so that we rarely catch a glimpse of the charismatic teacher and prophet who lived in Palestine about two thousand

years ago. The Jesus Christ of the Church often bears little resemblance to its founder”.

The six sessions move logically from “My Story, My Journey” (in which penetrating personal questions are confronted), through “Finding out more about Jesus”, “What Jesus Stood for”, “Jesus and his Friends, Following in the Way” to the sixth session “Living it out – a Programme for Tomorrow”.

From the start the technique of asking question after question keeps the pace and interest buzzing. The facts are set out clearly with scriptural examples for those who need them. Where there is controversy or alternative views and interpretations, these are stated without putting a particular point of view. People are left free to draw their own conclusions. It is this non-didactic approach that will pay off in achieving the aims of the programme.

Stepping out with the Sacred by Val Webb

Continuum 2010. hb 304 pp. ISBN 978-1441196422. £12.99 (£12.74 on Amazon)

Reviewed by John Churcher

The subtitle is 'Human Attempts to Engage the Divine' and it is more, much more than just a Christian view of such engagement. Here is an exciting book that considers various ways in which religions have stepped out on their particular journeys into the Divine. This is a well researched book that leads the reader into an awareness that it is through encountering different ways in which religions have described their sacred quests that we can appreciate a more inclusive understanding of the nature of faith.

Although such a title and sub-title may create anticipation that this will be more dry research of theologians and their institutions, Webb puts the academic into ordinary words and explanations. Often it reads as though you and Webb are sat side by side chatting over a cup of coffee. This is not to belittle the content or the quality of writing but to illustrate the ease and accessibility of profound material for those who are too busy to be bothered with the more erudite output of academic circles. None of this should be surprising when one realises that Webb is an established gifted writer and a teacher of the world's great religions.

Christ in Us Today

Reviewed by Adrian Alker

Christ in Us Today is the title of a group study booklet published by CANA (Christians Awakening to a New Awareness) and is the work largely of Adrian B Smith, whom many readers will know from his excellent book *Tomorrow's Christian*. This booklet (which can be downloaded as a PDF file or bought for £2 including postage) begins with extensive notes on how to work as a group and how to handle the material. These notes are followed by ten chapters, each no longer than two pages, under headings which range from 'God still speaks to us through Scripture' through to 'The Second Coming: Creating the Kingdom of God on Earth'. On the way the chapters tackle how Divine Truth evolves, the meaning of

Even the word “God” is eventually dealt with although it might have been helpful for those for whom primitive concepts of “God” are a real problem to have put this earlier, perhaps in Session 1, where personal ideas and attitudes are elicited.

At the start of each session there is a useful summary of what has gone before. This gives contextual continuity to the programme. A useful basic reading list and other sources of information complete the book.

The merit of *Walk the Jesus Walk* is that it bridges a gap between those who have difficulties with traditional or imposed beliefs about Christianity and the often daunting intellectual progressive movement. Using practical techniques and straightforward language John Simmonds has successfully constructed this bridge with both heart and head.

Unless she is quoting other authors, throughout the book Webb capitalizes the word GOD to indicate that 'God' is simply a three-letter word - a symbol across the religions that she deals with free of individual baggage and specific theologies. This starting point allows Webb to explore the different religions without falling into the trap that one is better than another. And yet, one of the thoughts that runs throughout the text like some golden thread is the sense that no matter how well any or all religions describe their experiences of the Divine, there is always more to discover and to describe.

For readers who are well versed in interfaith matters this book still has much to offer concerning the search for the engagement with the Divine. However, those who have little awareness of the foundations of the quest within other faiths then Val Webb has produced just the book for you! Not only will it encourage your own comprehension of the sacred but also it will help to build bridges of understanding with those who describe their distinct sacred roads into their God experiences.

Faith, Meditation, the Christ in Jesus, the Christ in us. The last session asks the group to formulate a Vision Statement on what they believe is emerging for the Christian Community of the future.

CANA describes itself as 'a loose-knit community of explorers who have Christian roots and share different experiences and insights for living out the teachings of Jesus in holistic and integrated ways'. For the best part of twenty years members of CANA have tried to ally the Christian tradition with New Age spirituality and have offered a refreshing pathway for those who value a more contemplative and inner searching approach to religious faith.

This is the background to this group study material. The subject matter certainly has links with many open minded approaches to faith, although in this case it is heavily influenced by writers such as Matthew Fox rather than, say, Marcus Borg. It is a pity that there are no questions at the end of each chapter, which is narrative in style. Each chapter being so short is therefore somewhat impressionistic rather than concisely informative and alongside such a booklet it

From the editor's chair

This issue has been a very tight squeeze, and I must apologise to those whose contributions have not got in. What is fascinating this time is that several people have chosen to write about the living out, the application of a progressive faith understanding, and I have wanted to give some priority to them, not least because this doesn't happen all that often! But that doesn't mean that theological reflection is lacking this quarter. Two authors, in particular, generously asked me to respond to what they wrote. Space hardly allows. But just very briefly.

Duncan Craig gives thoughtful voice to his belief in God as a being, and asks whether PCN has space for those who see faith in that way, giving instances of it being discounted. If it has been, we need as a community to learn generosity. To me, all portraits of God are just that – portraits. Each is entitled to the one that suits them, and none has any claim to truth superiority.

So I differ from Duncan in his conviction that God as being is the unique Christian default position.

would be good to actually read Fox's 'The Coming of the Cosmic Christ' to gain a deeper understanding of where the publishers are coming from.

'Christ in us today' tries to cover a lot of ground and it will be a refreshing new approach for some people but I would advise having a look at it as a download to see whether this particular course is for you or your group/community.

There is a strand in Christianity which sees 'being' as the nature of the works of God, and so not worthy of God in Gods-self. It is image, not definition.

He's got me wrong too! My 'that which we name as God' is not just an abstract principle! And his view of the 'national leadership' in no way accords with the Management Committee when I was on it, nor with what I know of those serving on it now.

Richard Tetlow makes a powerful and timely case for the need for openness towards people of other faith traditions, and in particular that of Islam. But in the process, as I see it, he overdoes his claim about the Church's abuse of power. I think, sadly, that such abuse is a feature of all three religions of the Book. In the past it has discredited Judaism and Islam just as much as Christianity, and in too many parts of the world it still tarnishes all of them. A fresh expression, an honest dialogue, is certainly called for. But all three faiths need to own up to that.

Copy date for the next newsletter. Contributions for the June issue (including local group news) **must** reach the editor, Hugh Dawes by **Friday 27th May 2011 - at the very latest**, preferably a bit before. Email them please to hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk or if you cannot use email, post them to Andy Vivian, PCN Britain, at the address below. All posted contributions must be typed.

Pieces with a summer slant would be good to have, whether inspired by the season, or the joys of holidaying, or even the challenges of generational coexistence. Some of the themes pieces in this issue – whether the ones I highlight above or others – would be very welcome. I see this newsletter as a place of dialogue – one to be carried out with generosity and understanding. We are all of us explorers.

Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on your envelope if you post to Andy.

The Progressive Christianity Network – Britain (Registered Charity No 1102164) is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations, and has links in particular with the Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States. PCN Britain's website is online at www.pcnbritain.org.uk, with information and resources. TCPC's website also offers a wealth of material for open and progressive Christian understanding. Visit it at www.tcpc.org. You can email us at info@pcnbritain.org.uk, phone us on 01594 516528, or mail us at PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire GL14 1BB.

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