

# Progressive Voices



March 2024, PV48

# 20 Years of PCN

As 2023 drew to an end, two celebrations took place, in Reading and York, to mark twenty years of the life of PCN and to share our hopes and dreams of what the next twenty years might have in store for our organisation.

The celebrations were significant in that these were the first zoom-less conferences, recalling those pre Covid pandemic days, when it felt okay to travel on public transport, mix with others for a day, share food and meet friends old and new. Thankfully there were no train strikes. About 100 people in all came together over the two Saturdays and the occasions felt very worthwhile, both in looking back and considering the future.

For the first hour at each event we were given a narrated visual presentation, crafted around three 'P's: People, Purpose and Practice. Who were those significant folk who had the determination to emulate our brothers and sisters in the USA? What did those early organisers hope to achieve and how did they set about their task? We learnt of the founding vision of Jim Adams who had brought about the progressive Christian movement across the pond. We remembered that Hugh Dawes, vicar of St James, Cambridge became a trustee of the American movement and was largely responsible for the launch of the UK progressive movement.

It was so good that Hugh, now sadly in ill health, was able to join us in Reading alongside his wife Jill, who had been PCN secretary and a key mover and shaker! Jill, Sandra Griffiths, Alan Powell, Monty Lynds, John Churcher and myself, as some of the earliest trustees, had great pleasure in putting together the 20 year history of PCN. Pleasure also in a little nostalgia for those early days when inspiration came from groupings such as Free to Believe, St Marks CRC, Inclusive Church and others. This narrated slide show has now been kept both as an archive and as a downloadable resource on our website so that groups and individuals not able to be with us last November might still find this looking back both informative and helpful in thinking about the future of PCN.

Amongst those important people were of course many 'giants' of critical thinking about church and Christianity. We hear recorded clips of Marcus Borg and Jack Spong speaking at different conferences in our past. Their distinctive voices alone brought back such fond memories. They are deeply missed.

We considered the central purpose of PCN, the network of all the groups, the bringing people together in conferences, the support of those in churches of all denominations and types, where the progressive voice might be allowed (or challenged!) to be heard. In practice we rejoiced that we could collaborate with other like-minded organisations,



that we could be 'on show' at Greenbelt, that we dared to present the bishops, at the 2008 Lambeth Conference, with our book of progressive essays under the title 'Together in Hope'.

The celebrations continued into the afternoon by reflecting upon our more recent work. In York, one of our six Made of Stories films, 'Anti-Racist Cumbria' was shown and one of the founders of that initiative, Janett Walker, spoke to us in a recorded message, challenging us to consider how PCN could be a force for good in the work of anti-racism, both in and beyond our organisation. The film and Janett caused some stir and debate and that, in itself, was a healthy sign that we can be a home for controversy and a plurality of opinions and views.

Of equal interest at our Reading event was a young writer and lecturer at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Victoria Turner. Victoria considered contemporary events such as the (then) early days of the Gaza-Israel conflict, probing us to consider how radical (or not) are the Christian voices in such situations. Bland statements from Christian leaders seemed neither to move matters forward nor to carry the profoundly challenging words and work of Christ into such desperate situations.

The word 'challenge' has appeared much in this short account of the conferences. Holding a progressive Christian faith is indeed a challenge both in the face of stubborn conservatism of so many church leaders and an increasingly secular society inimical to the claims of religion. However, I personally came away from those two conference days thankful to meet again friends old and new, to feel a sense of mutual support and a sense of determination to meet the challenges of representing and promoting a Christianity credible for the twenty first century. Ever onwards!

**Adrian Alker**



# Contents

- 2 20 Years of PCN
- 3 Welcome; Staff & Trustees
- 4 Chair's Letter; Membership
- 5 Appreciating the seeds
- 6 What happened in Holy Week?
- 8 Judgement at Bristol
- 10 Poem: Three Roads; Letter: Chesterfield
- 11 Journey of Faith
- 12 Interview: Thomas Jay Oord
- 14 The Power of Mystical Poetry
- 15 Imagined teachings of Jesus
- 16 Defining God
- 17 Poem: The Force; Letter: God?
- 18 Sketch: A Vicar's Dilemma
- 20 Poem: What God Is
- 21 News from local groups
- 22 Reviews: Confounding the Mighty, A Simple Faith in a Complicated World; Letters: Various PV thoughts, Corrections
- 23 Temptations

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# Welcome

At the start of the week you worry about blank pages, but at the end you're finding ways to squeeze in extra items - the joys of PV editing! So in this issue we reflect on our last 20 years and scattered throughout are questions and comments from members. We ponder Holy Week, who is our neighbour, love, mysticism, expressing faith and of course, God. I also offer a picture strip trying to explain Jesus' Temptations accessibly and clearly. Welcome to the 48th edition of PV. Enjoy!

*Dave Coaker*

## PCN Britain AGM

Saturday 27th April  
More details to follow.

## Copy Deadlines: Jun: Friday 26th April

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Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions, are all welcome. Publication is at the editor's discretion:  
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# Chair's Letter

Dear friends,

It feels a bit like the world is on fire at the moment, perhaps you've noticed? Authoritarian leaders continue to threaten conflict, while democratic governments struggle to know how to keep a cash strapped electorate on-side. Policy platforms lurch towards extremism, while special advisors calculate which group of people is most likely to feel strongly about any particular issue and work out formulas for success on the backs of beer mats.

Old categories of 'left and right' seem to make less and less sense in political terms. Previously 'hands off' parties seem determined to micromanage our lives, while others seem no longer willing to support workers on strike or to speak out against global injustices.

The old binaries, if they ever really existed, have more or less completely failed us.

Perhaps that should tell us something about binary positions – that they are pretty much always false. The reality is always much more complicated.

I was asked recently about my personal 'faith'. "But do you believe in God?" my questioner insisted. I explained that I could only really give an answer to that if we first agree three things: what "I" means, what "believe" means, and what "God" means. We could probably have argued about "in" too, but I was willing to concede that point.

The trouble is that we throw around apparently simple phrases as if we all understand them in the same way and agree, precisely, on what they mean. The reality is that we don't. Just the word "God" alone is an enormously difficult and complicated idea. For some it refers, effectively, to 'a man on a cloud', for others it might mean 'the ground of being', and there are various other stances one might take either side of those two apparent poles.

I heard Giles Fraser challenge Richard Dawkins about this point at the Greenbelt festival in 2022. "That God you don't believe in, we don't believe in him either!" Fraser complained. Dawkins wasn't fussed, he's not interested in trying to sell books to the sort of people who are willing to do some theological homework. He's got a big enough market with folk who take a 'simple' approach, particularly, he confessed, in the USA.

I'm sometimes challenged by people who accuse PCN of being a 'talking shop' – a place where much is discussed, and little is 'done'. Those folk may be right; we probably do need to find ways of doing more – although I'm always encouraged to find PCN members hard at work in campaigning on all kinds of causes through other networks and groups.

Ultimately, though, we must not downplay the value of discussion, of talking. It is in discussion, in open

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and honest dialogue, that we start to work out what it is we're talking about. What do we mean when we say "God", for instance?

Maybe we could hope that in having those conversations we could find that I don't believe in the God that you don't believe in. Maybe by talking we can continue to breakdown the false binaries that seem to keep us apart. Maybe the divide between talking and doing is another false binary. Maybe talking more will actually help put out the fire.

## REVEREND CROSS

PCN Britain is delighted to share the news that our Chair is to be ordained and inducted to serve Peter's House and the Hull Area Team of the United Reformed Church this summer.

Congratulations to Simon and his family, and we commend him to the URC folk of Yorkshire and the communities of Hull.

*(And before too long it'll be Rev'd Dr. Cross!)*



## 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.

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# Appreciating the seeds

I would like to express my appreciation to PCN for providing a space in which people can express views on Christianity that do not necessarily tie in with traditional thinking. I have to say that mainstream Christian Churches do not seem very good at handling opinions that challenge their own. My background is Baptist/Methodist/Anglican, but it is only recently that I have had the opportunity, and need, to deeply probe what are traditionally held to be fundamental Christian truths. In the case of Anglicanism, these stated 'truths' are primarily found in the creeds and various liturgies.

My first realisation was that any human attempt to define an infinite God must, by definition, fall far short of actuality. Any human statement about God can therefore only be provisional and a 'best guess' in the circumstances prevailing at the time. When overlaid by cultural conditioning, and the fact that perception of reality will differ between people, then that 'best guess' becomes even more fragile.

My second realisation was that the basic Christian doctrines and writings were not laid down by Jesus or even by any of the original 12 disciples. The process was started many years after Jesus by Paul. Paul was then followed decades later by the Gospel writers whose identities and backgrounds are unknown. Paul's writings were primarily concerned with his interpretation of doctrine, so we rely mostly on the later writings of the Gospels for details of Jesus' life and teaching. Here, analysis by many esteemed scholars shows very convincingly the considerable difficulties in treating the Gospels as a literal record of Jesus' life, teaching and ministry.

My third realisation was that the creedal statements of the Anglican Church, which are the same in Roman Catholicism and widely adopted by other denominations, were formulated some 1500 years ago, a very long time after Jesus. It is notable that barely any creedal statement can be directly attributed to any likely words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. Instead, they are the product of inference, experience, and reflection settled at a seemingly arbitrary point in ancient history. Further, the creeds were arrived at amid huge political turmoil and power struggles of their age so were themselves the product of fierce debate, negotiation, and compromise. Since then, despite the very considerable changes in society and advances in our understanding of the workings of the world, these basic 'truths' have so far been denied any further significant development or refinement by every Christian denomination that has adopted them. Why that has been the case can in part be found in subsequent Christian history, not least in its close ties with matters of state.

The creedal denominations no longer enjoy the political influence and control they once had, nor the wider social respect. While this may have a positive dimension, it has left the creedal Churches struggling to find a new identity and purpose in the wider society. The great sadness is that rather than take a close critical look at themselves with a view to reform, they have preferred to remain echo chambers preserving fixed and ancient views of God and of themselves.

Some, maybe many, will dispute this but the core teaching of Jesus, when later additions and interpretations have been stripped away, was based on Jesus' unshakeable belief that the arrival of the Kingdom of God was imminent (eschatology); hence the urgency of his preaching imploring people to make peace both with God and with one's neighbours. Peace with God is about oneness with God just as it is with one's neighbour. The two are inseparable. Oneness with one's neighbour is therefore not just about exercising tolerance, not resorting to violence, or simply helping them out, as important as these things are. It is also about working together towards being of one mind with God. A step in this direction is being prepared, in all humility, to recognise that the other person may have something extremely valuable to say about God, no matter how odd it may initially seem. Logically, this open and enquiring mindset will lead to genuine moves to build bridges over which ideas and discussion can eventually flow in both directions, forever enhancing both one's own and one's neighbour's perception and experience of God. In other words, towards oneness. After all, no one has the monopoly on good ideas and, as the saying goes, the person who never changes their mind changes nothing.

Unfortunately, as I have intimated, what I see at the heart of Christianity, as expressed by and through its creeds, doctrines, and liturgies appears to be the antithesis of the conditions necessary to hasten the coming of the Kingdom (of God) that Christianity says it desires. I have recently been accused by an Anglican Diocesan Bishop of "cynical arrogance" (those were the words he used) in suggesting that we nowadays might have something useful to add to the views and experiences of the ancient Church Fathers; his view being that 2000 years of Christian tradition is its own attestation. I rest my case.

Once again, my gratitude to PCN who, along with others, help to reassure me that a second Reformation might not be a total fantasy and that the seeds may have already been sown.

**Richard Thirkell**



# What happened in Holy Week?

## OCCUPY!

Back in 2011 the Occupy movement took over the steps of St Paul's Cathedral. It was an exciting spectacle with 250 tents and discussions going on at all hours. A bit like an urban Greenbelt! One of the banners said, 'WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? I thought, 'Yes, this is what Jesus would do'. Only later, would I realise that is just what Jesus did!

## TRUTH FROM FICTION

My progressive understanding of Holy Week started when I was following the story in the gospels and making some notes. Suddenly a sentence popped into my mind: 'It was hot in the Jordan valley'. 'Hello', I thought, 'that sounds like the beginning of a novel. Perhaps I had better write one.' That is how my book, 'Jesus the Troublemaker - his last eight days', came into being. It is a historical novel about the incredible last week of Jesus' life.

Writing a historical novel was much more exacting than I had expected. You must be rigorous in terms of location, timing, character and context. After all Jesus was a 1st century Galilean Jew who spoke Aramaic. So, in the book all names are in Aramaic. Jesus is Yeshua, Simon Peter is Shim'on Kefa. And reliable historical sources are crucial.

## WHO TO TRUST?

When I studied history at Oxford many years ago, I became certain that Mark was our best historical source, often as good as a first-hand witness. An actual first-hand witness at Gethsemane: 'A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.' (Mark 14.51-52), But how do Luke and Mathew shape up? Luke reports Mark accurately, so I take his account of the last supper seriously, though it is taken from a different tradition. Matthew editorialises and subtly twists things to fit his theology - I don't trust him! I didn't know what to make of John until I read Richard Bauckham's book 'The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple'. He argues that the writer was a Jerusalem disciple, whose accounts of events in Jerusalem need to be taken seriously. That is why, apart from chapters 6 and 21, only 22 verses are set in Galilee. We are also told that he was known to the high priest's family, which then makes sense. (John 18.16). So, I take seriously the events described, though the speeches and dialogues are more the product of a scriptwriter than a historian.

## THE START OF THE STORY

The story of Yeshua's last week really starts three days earlier in the Jordan Valley. 'They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.' (Mark 10.32)



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It is a compelling picture. Yeshua preoccupied and stressed as he contemplates the conflict awaiting him in Jerusalem/Yerushalayim. And his loneliness surrounded by his uncomprehending followers. That is when he tells his closest followers: "(The Gentiles) will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10.34) It is likely that this episode goes back to the earliest tradition, probably to Jesus himself, *because it's wrong!* The resurrection is reported as happening 36 hours after his death. It is at most two days. That is why Matthew and Luke smooth over the difference by having Jesus speak of rising on the third day - a theoretical possibility if Jesus died before sunset and rose after sunrise.

## WHY WAS JESUS LATE?

A couple of days later Yeshua finally arrived at Yerushalayim. Mark tells us that Yeshua entered the temple on late Palm Sunday (or more likely on Palm Thursday if John is right about the feast at Bethany, six days before Passover, see John 12). 'Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.' (Mark 11.11) Note: it does not say, he went *back* to Bethany.

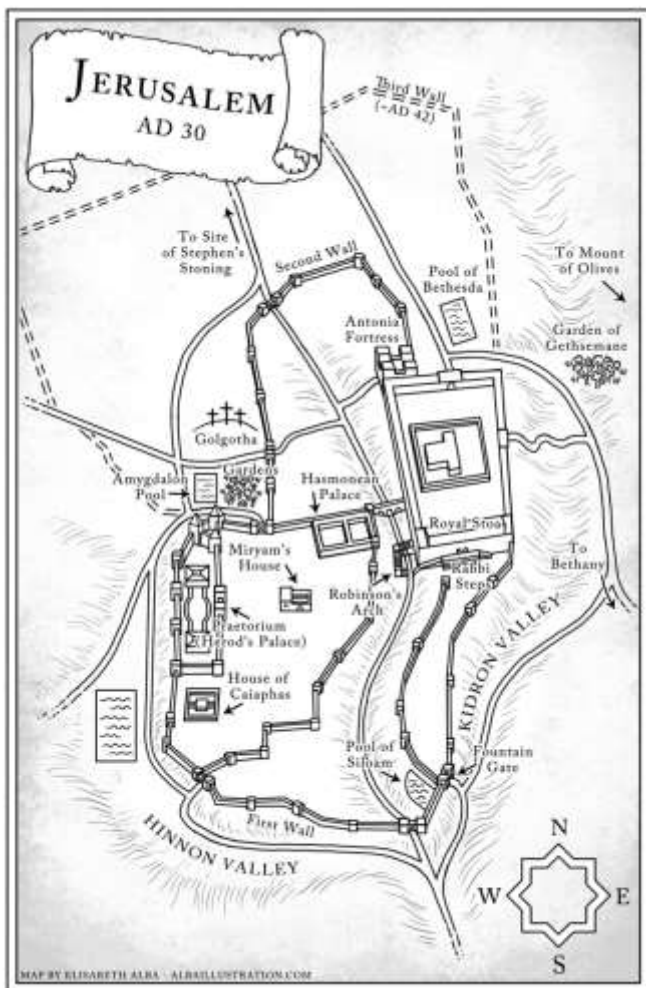
Why was he late in arriving at Yerushalayim? Because he had just walked eighteen miles uphill from Jericho! If he left Jericho at 6.00am he would have got to Yerushalayim at 3.00pm.

## UPROAR IN THE TEMPLE

What happened the following day? Most would recall Jesus throwing out the money-changers and merchants, as in the famous painting by El Greco. But what Yeshua did was much more radical. Two verses in Mark provide the clue:

1. He threw out both the traders and their customers - those who were both selling and buying. Not pilgrims, but good Jerusalem citizens coming to do their shopping. (Mark 11.14)
2. He would not allow anyone to carry trade goods through the temple. (Mark 11.16)

Note: the NRSV says he would not allow people to carry 'anything' through. This is simply wrong. The Greek word is 'vessels' 'skeuos', presumably large pottery jars used for transporting grain, oil, or wine.



This is the critical statement. The temple had the only eastern gateway in Jerusalem. If the temple was blocked off, traders would have to go through the northern gate by the Antonia Fortress, or by the long southern route through the Fountain Gate.

### BUT HOW?

How could Yeshua have prevented the transport of goods through the very large space of the Outer Court? How did he stop the traffic? There is no evidence, simply imagination and common sense.

Yeshua had some resources to hand. He had tens of thousands of excitable Galilean followers. And he had the element of surprise. All he needed to do was to arrange for some of them to take over the temple gates, enough so that they would not be dislodged by the temple police and their truncheons. But how did Yeshua get the temple police to leave their stations at the gates? By creating a mini riot in the middle of the Outer Court: *'With a rapid two-handed lift Jesus tipped the heavy table up, spilling all the silver coins over the temple floor. He strode over to the next table. "OUT!" he shouted, and tipped that table over too. Soon there was massive confusion with the currency exchangers and the crowd, scrabbling for coins on the marble pavement and other pilgrims joining in the fun. The temple guards rushed to the disturbance but were helpless before the manic uproar which now had infected*

*hundreds of the pilgrims.... Too late , the temple guards realised that they had left all the gateways unattended and that they were now in the hands of burly Galilean pilgrims, looking threateningly pious, and outnumbering the guards two to one.*

*'At each of the gates a traffic jam was developing as traders tried to bring their carts through the Temple as a short cut, only to be met by half a dozen muscled northerners who said, "You're not going to bring that through here, are you, sunshine?" And then they couldn't turn round because the cart behind them was blocking their way. It was absolute chaos.'* (From 'Jesus the Troublemaker')

### THE TAKEOVER

Then what? Did Yeshua think better of it, decide he should let things calm down. *"I'm very sorry, officer, I won't do it again."* Jesus was not that kind of person. In fact, the following day the chief priests ask him, *"By what authority are you doing these things?"* Not, *"did you do these things."*

I am convinced that for the rest of that Passover week, as long as Yeshua was alive and had thousands of loyal followers with him, that ban on using the temple as a short cut stayed in place. The moneychangers could have relocated to the area outside the southern gateways by the racing stadium. The dealers in animals could have used the area outside the northern gate by the Pool of Bethesda, outside the city walls, where they would have had their animals overnight anyway.

### THE CHALLENGE

Over the next few days there were several confrontations between Yeshua and the temple authorities. Picture the scene. Yeshua is walking and teaching in Solomon's Porch, as he did earlier at the Feast of Dedication (John 10.23). Solomon's Porch or Portico was a massive double colonnaded walkway running the whole length of the eastern wall. It was directly in front of the entrance to the temple itself - the Court of Israel leading to the Court of Priests and the Hall of Unpolished Stone where the Sanhedrin met. It was a direct attack on the temple establishment, the high priests, and the religious lawyers.

But not the Pharisees. Only Matthew has a direct attack on them, the whole of Matthew 23. I believe this reflects the later situation after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, when the Pharisees re-established Judaism as a rabbinic religion. Matthew's editorial insertion began the shameful history of Christian antisemitism.

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

We are familiar with the next stage of the story: the Last Supper, Yeshua's arrest and trials, his crucifixion, the empty tomb. But questions arise which stubbornly refuse to go away:

Did Yeshua engineer his own death?

What was Yeshua thinking in the lead up to all this?



# Judgement at Bristol

The murder on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, of George Floyd, a 46 year-old black man by a white police officer in America led to Black Lives Matter protests around the world. In England demonstrators toppled the statue of Edward Colston, a 17th-century slave trader and lowered it into the waters of Bristol's docks. During the 19th century Colston was memorialised with the statue in the city's centre and by stained glass windows in Bristol's Cathedral and the city's largest church St Mary Redcliffe. In the twentieth century, England's *Church Times* newspaper hailed Colston as Bristol's Saint.

Yet on the seventh of June 2020, just hours after Edward Colston's statue sank in the city's harbour, the Right Reverend Vivienne Faull, the Bishop of Bristol, sent this message via Twitter:

'After today's march for justice for black people and the fall of the statue of Colston, let's repent of the evils of our slave trading past, the racism of so many years, and the institutional oppression which is still so powerful, and let's build Bristol as a city of hope for all.'

That evening the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, went on television and accused Bristol's demonstrators of being lawless, disorderly and utterly disgraceful. She urged the police to ensure that 'justice' was meted out to those engaged in such behaviour.

Within days, Bristol's Cathedral and St Mary Redcliffe had taken down, or covered up, their stained glass windows honouring Colston. For years individuals and small groups in Bristol had been asking the city and its churches to remove the memorials to Colston. Yet in the twenty-first century St Mary Redcliffe was still hosting 'Colston Day' services attended by many school children.

In 2017 the Colston service coincided with the United Nation's Anti-Slavery Day. Five police officers were sent to ensure the service would not be disrupted. The children arriving at the church



**Martin Smith** is a retired EMMY award-winning documentary filmmaker who was the first exhibition director at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

were met by two protesters from the group Countering Colston - one of whom held a placard asking: 'How is worshipping mass-murderers an OUTSTANDING education?'

2017 was the last year a 'Colston Day' service was held at the church. Three years later, following George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter protests things had changed. Canon Dan Tyndall, the vicar of St Mary Redcliffe put it this way:

"The toppling of Edward Colston turned an international spotlight onto Bristol and its entangled history profiting, as it most certainly did, from human trafficking. The opportunity to reimagine how we can tell the story of the Good Samaritan was grasped enthusiastically by the church."

Canon Tyndall, Bishop Faull and St Mary Redcliffe's Parochial Church Council were agreed, they wanted to permanently remove the windows that praised Edward Colston and his motto 'Go thou and do likewise'. In England such a change is a matter of law. Each diocese has a 'Consistory Court' and permanent changes to church buildings can only begin after a Faculty [permission] has been granted. Getting a Faculty from the Consistory Court can be a contested, time-consuming endeavour.

In November 2020 Jesus College, Cambridge told CofE authorities that it wanted to remove a marble memorial to Tobias Rustat from its chapel. Rustat, the College pointed out, had a long term financial involvement with the Royal African Company and knew the company shipped thousands of enslaved African men, women and children for sale in the Americas. In March 2022, a Judgement from the Diocese of Ely's Consistory Court refused to grant the College a Faculty to move its tribute to Tobias Rustat. The failure to secure a Faculty cost Jesus College, Cambridge £120,000.

At St Mary Redcliffe, Canon Dan Tyndall selected a committed local parishioner, textile artist Elizabeth Hewitt, to be the Chair and organiser of a working party to prepare an extensive 'Petition' capable of convincing the Chancellor of Bristol's Consistory Court, Justin Gau, to grant a Faculty for the permanent removal of the Colston windows. Tyndall's assistant vicar, Kat Campion-Spall, suggested that the new windows be used for a visual exploration of the question that Jesus answered with the Good Samaritan story: 'And who is my neighbour?'





Those five words became the theme of a competition open to all for the design of four new stained glass windows to replace the ones installed in 1870 exalting Edward Colston. As the working party set about organising the rules, procedures, judging and practicalities of the competition, one of its members Rhys Williams, St Mary Redcliffe's Heritage Development Manager, was writing an extensively researched document, *Edward Colston and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. His first two sentences encapsulated the life of a wealthy trader in human livestock:

“Edward Colston (1636-1721) was a merchant, slave trader, moneylender, politician, charitable benefactor, Anglican, moralist and paternalist whose career and legacy cast a long shadow over Bristol society during the three centuries following his death. For most of that time, Colston was admired for his establishment credentials, celebrated for his mercantile prowess, worshipped for his munificence, and revered as a secular city saint.”

Rhys Williams drew attention to the work of Roger Ball of the University of the West of England, whose assessment is that some 19,000 enslaved Africans died on the transatlantic ships hired by the Royal African Company - in which Edward Colston's investments proved to be so rewarding.

In 2020 Archbishop Justin Welby's Commission for Racial Justice declared that:

“The enslavement of Africans over hundreds of years, and the Trans-Atlantic and the Arabian Trade that supported it, are among the worst atrocities ever committed by human beings against each other...Despite the presence of some individuals who spoke out against the trade in human lives, the Church of England did not as an institution call out the evil nature of what was happening. Instead, the Church and many of its clergy benefitted from it.”

With pages of facts about Edward Colston's mercantile life and much more, St Mary Redcliffe's working party hoped that Chancellor Justin Gau could be convinced that 'panels of glass that commemorate a slave trader are inconsistent with the church's mission'. They were also aware that any replacement windows would need beauty and strength to be accepted in a church that Gau regarded as magnificent and which elsewhere 'would be a cathedral'.

The design competition for the replacement Good Samaritan images was not limited to trained artists. The entrants' identities were not revealed to the seven judges, who came from diverse backgrounds and were first asked to select a shortlist of five designs. The shortlisted entries were then displayed for a month inside St Mary Redcliffe where visitors were asked to write comments about the designs. The final judging of the competition took place within the church. The decision of the seven judges was unanimous.

The winner was Ealish Swift, a junior doctor living and working in Bristol. In Swift's designs Jesus is depicted as a person of multiple ethnicities in stories that are part of Bristol's history. It is her belief that 'God's love is woven throughout the four panels'.

In the first panel Swift evokes the biblical miracle of Jesus calming the sea. In the second Jesus is depicted as a protester during the 1965 Bristol Bus Boycott. The third panel has Jesus in a refugee boat crowded with children. Swift ends her Good Samaritan quartet with Jesus among a diverse group of neighbours in front of a Bristol hillside. Beneath the four images, in stained-glass, are the words: 'Luke 10:29 And who is my neighbour?'

'There is no indication that the introduction of the windows will cause anything but slight harm to the significance of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest. I am also satisfied that the work and mission of the church are being hindered by the presence of the windows and their replacement would assist pastorally in this multi-cultural and diverse parish.'

Such was Chancellor Justin Gau's Judgement when Bristol's Consistory Court granted a Faculty for the removal of the Colston windows at St Mary Redcliffe. 'I am satisfied on the balance of probabilities' said Gau:

- a. Colston was an investor in the Royal African Company as his father and brother had been.
- b. Colston was an Assistant in the RAC from 1687.
- c. Colston used his connections with the RAC to trade in goods used for the purchase of slaves.
- d. During meetings of the RAC when Colston was present there were discussions about the purchase, transport and sale of slaves.
- e. In 1687 the RAC discussed and recorded, with regret, the financial cost to the RAC of transporting ill slaves.
- f. Colston became Deputy Governor of the RAC in 1689 a position requiring his presence, along with that of the Sub-Governor, on all company committees.



- g. Colston obtained substantial financial benefit from his investments in the RAC.
- h. The views of the Church during Colston's life were not wholly supportive of the slave trade.
- i. When the window in question was introduced in 1870 neither the Church nor wider society were aware of his involvement in the slave trade.
- j. From his death until 1920 there was little or no information about his involvement in the slave trade.
- k. From 1920 until 2017 the Church attempted to justify Colston's behaviour as reflecting the morals of his day."

Gau's Judgement chided St Mary Redcliffe for its pastoral record:

'The Church of England and the historical behaviour of this parish Church in excusing the life of Colston have a journey of repentance to make. To excuse or ignore the slave trade is a sin... To encourage parishioners to look at a memorial to a slave trader and to be encouraged to 'Go thou and do likewise' is not only grotesque but entirely contrary to the Gospel command to love one another and flies in the face of the model of life set out in the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy.'

The repentance sought was in evidence at the church in August 2023, when Bishop Faull and Canon Tyndall welcomed hundreds of diverse people to see four panes of stained glass unveiled, and to celebrate the 60th anniversary of a victory for Bristol's West Indian and Asian community.

August 28th 1963 was the day Dr. Martin Luther King told America 'I have a dream'. In Bristol it was the day that Bristol's West Indian community announced a successful end to their boycott of Bristol's buses, an action that forced Bristol's Bus Company to abandon their colour bar and agree to employ Black and Asian bus crews. The crowded church was quiet as Bishop Faull told them:

"I acknowledge with shame the opposition to the boycott of the then Bishop of Bristol, my predecessor and of the Council of Churches. The then-bishop, who sided with the City Council and the trade union the TGWU, worked to circumvent Paul Stephenson and others here in the West Indian Development Council."

"The Bus Boycott of 1963" said Faull "is a reminder that my church abjectly failed to see Jesus in those who were exploited, marginalised, oppressed and I am sorry and shamed..."

More positively she expressed hope and thanks:

"I am very grateful indeed to Canon Dan Tyndall for his leadership within the church and parish of St Mary Redcliffe, and to Ealish Swift, the artist who has so wonderfully and powerfully responded to the brief to create these four beautiful new windows... Through these windows, we are told of the dream and hope of justice. May that dream continue to convince, challenge and inspire us to find Jesus in those who are being exploited, marginalised, and oppressed in our world today."

## Three Roads

Three roads lead to the Kingdom of God.

The first is Beauty -

the way of the creative, passionate soul.

The second is Truth -

the way of the rational, inquisitive soul.

The third is Goodness -

the way of the righteous, progressive soul.

And each road passes through all lands,

and each road stretches through all ages,

and each road teaches the same three lessons -

First humility,

then courage,

and finally, love.

Three roads lead to the Kingdom of God -

like three sides of a pyramid,

each narrowing as it rises,

and moving inextricably towards

the highest point.

**Robin Drummond**

## Chesterfield

I chair Christians Together for Chesterfield, which aims to give greater unity and effect to the 40 congregations in the town.

On Ash Wednesday (which coincides with Valentine's day), there will be a secular pilgrimage to our Walking Men Memorial. Right where junction 29A of the M1 now operates, there was a notable coalmine called Markham, in which 106 men and boys were lost in the course of 3 disasters.

The community created a vision to commemorate them, and we now have a whole lot of 'walking figures' looking as if they are walking to work (light-coloured) and walking home again (dark figures), with their name tags on them (as they would have had). It took years to create and pay for the figures, but this year, on the eve of a month-long exhibition about the Miners' Strike 40 years ago, the notion of walking alongside these 'Walking Men' is 'taking off', and – would you believe – what are otherwise unwelcome alterations and reductions to our bus service have produced number 90 going to the very starting point of the walk. I am using a mobile PA system to share some of the guide book as we go up and down, and a man may walk with us who missed the 1973 tragedy by 10 minutes. These sacred / secular occasions can be very rich, can't they?

**Paul King**



# Journey of Faith

On the 5th Nov, Tatjana Ljujic spoke to The Galilee Group on Jesus as a point of connection, rather than division, between Christianity and Islam. Her interest in interfaith dialogue is personal, as well as academic. Tatjana, a Serb, is married to Nuno, a Bosnian Muslim whom she met during the war in former Yugoslavia. Their relationship started while their communities were engaged in armed conflict. Following a year of separation after Nuno had fled the country and sought asylum in the Netherlands, Tatjana joined him in exile. They married as soon as they left the refugee camp. They have since moved to England where their son Isak was born. Isak is growing up in an inter-faith household, with his devout Christian mum and practising Muslim dad. He doesn't think this is at all weird.

Tatjana Ljujić is training for priesthood in the Church of England. She is an ordinand at Sarum College, where she is studying for an MA. Tatjana's previous academic study and research was in the field of literature and the visual arts. She was a student at the Universities of Belgrade, Utrecht, and Cambridge. During her doctoral research at Cambridge, she taught on the subject Literature and Visual Culture. Tatjana's academic interest later shifted to theology. She has published work on theology and film and theology and disability.

After Tatjana's presentation, members proposed that Tatjana's statement on her journey of faith should be shared with PCN. She graciously agreed.

**Tim Yaeger**

Tatjana Ljujic on her journey of faith:

I wasn't raised a Christian; I came to faith later in life. I grew up in the former Yugoslavia, a country where organised religion was suppressed by the communist authorities. Religious belief was considered to be an irrational and backward system of thought that stood in the way of scientific progress and socio-economic and political liberation. That was the view of religion that I was brought up with and the role the church played in the disintegration of Yugoslavia served only to cement it. In taking the opportunity to fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism, the church aligned itself with the nationalist movement and provided fuel for the reactionary ideology that scapegoated our Muslim neighbours and ultimately led to genocide.



It was against this background (nationalist hysteria, civil war, and the unholy role the Serbian Orthodox Church played in it all) that I first came across Jesus's teaching. I was in the first year at university. We studied parts of the New Testament for the course on the literatures of Classical Antiquity. My encounter with the Sermon on the Mount sowed a seed for a radical change that would take place in the way I thought about God, humanity, and the world. The more I read, the more reaffirmed I felt in the core socialist values of equality, inclusion, and social justice that were instilled in me in my childhood, as well as in the moral imperative to stand with the marginalised and the oppressed and to work for liberation.

Though I found my spiritual home in Christian faith as a young adult, I would not find a home in a church community until my early forties. In Serbia, it was the church's nationalist ethos that drew me away. In Holland, where I moved to when I was twenty, it was the exclusivist mentality of the Dutch Reformed churches that repelled me. This, of course, does not mean that on the whole these two denominations are the way I just described them. I am simply relating my personal experience of encounter with a few specific church congregations from these traditions, which I, as a young person, took to represent the state of the organised Christian religion in general.

This would change radically when, in 2018, I met Rev Tim Yeager, who at the time was the vicar of St George's, Westcombe Park, in London. The congregation of St George's under Tim's shepherdhood served the poor and the marginalised of our local community both by offering practical support (e.g. providing food and shelter for the homeless) and by tirelessly working for liberation and social change: from actively supporting local hospital workers in their struggle for living wage and lobbying the local MP on environmental issues, to campaigning for change in the church so that our queer sisters and brothers are accepted as the full and equal members of the Body of Christ.

My encounter with Rev Tim and the work of St George's was not just faith-transforming, but also life-transforming – as my vocational journey since then testifies. I was among the first attendees of the Galilee Course, which Tim designed as a progressive alternative to Alpha and which he ran at St George's before it moved online during the pandemic. I am delighted to be invited to speak to the Galilee Group, and on a topic that is so very close to my heart.

**Tatjana Ljujic**

# Interview: Thomas Jay Oord

The theologian Thomas Jay Oord, author of books like 'God Can't' and 'The Uncontrolling Love of God' is already well known to some PCN members. He gave a well-received presentation to the Reading group last summer and has connected with others online and during his UK visits. He will be back on this side of the Atlantic again in August this year, and we're currently working with him to arrange a few intimate events in between his major speaking commitments.

Oord is an energetic and passionate communicator, but for some he's also controversial. While his stance on things like the nature of divine power and the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion are likely to be familiar to many PCN members, they've not always been well received by his own denomination.

Like a number of people before him, Oord has chosen to remain within the tradition that he grew up in, and this has not been an altogether comfortable experience. He lost his job as a professor of theology and philosophy at the Northwest Nazarene University in 2015, under controversial circumstances. A popular and well-respected educator, his contract was officially terminated for financial reasons, but former students and online commentators smelled a rat and claimed that his progressive, and progressing, ideas were clashing too directly with the traditionalist teachings favoured by the institution.

Losing his tenured position didn't prevent him from making his voice heard; if anything it amplified him, leading to accusations of false teaching from the traditionalist lobby within the Church of the Nazarene in the USA. It may, or may not, seem strange that people should wish to quiet someone who repeatedly affirms that he believes love should be central to theology and church life.

Among his most recent publications is a multi-author text which argues for the 'full inclusion' of LGBTQ+ folk within the Nazarenes. Although this wasn't intended to be controversial necessarily, it was certainly provocative. That provocation has led Oord into further hot water with his denominational colleagues. In some ways the conflict seems like a microcosm of the bigger picture in the USA and beyond, tectonic plates shifting, rubbing against each other with troublesome consequences for whoever gets too close to the join.

As part of our ongoing project to showcase a range of 'progressive voices', here's an interview I conducted with Tom via email – do look out for an opportunity to hear him in person during his visit to the UK in August.

**Simon Cross** serves as the  
Chair of PCN Britain.  
[simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk)



**You've written a lot about the nature of the power of God. Can you give a simple overview of your approach?**

Yes, rethinking God's power has been a central theme in my writings. A host of issues hinge on a plausible view of God's power. Like most people, I reject the idea God controls everything. But many people retain the idea God *could* control and occasionally does so. These people say God gives freedom and agency but sometimes intervenes or singlehandedly brings about outcomes.

I think God never intervenes and never controls. As I see it, God *can't* control anyone or anything. But I do believe God is always present and active, influencing everyone and everything. After all, if God *is* love, and love positively influences all, God can't control any. To put it another way, I reject the classic view of divine omnipotence.

In Christian circles, I sometimes call my view "essential kenosis" and appeal to the famous Philippians kenosis passage. Essential kenosis says God necessarily self-gives in love and can't control others. In broader circles, I call my view "amipotence." I coined this word to describe a view of God in which love comes first, and divine power is uncontrolling love.

**I think you take, broadly, a 'progressive' approach to theology; do you agree with that characterisation? And if so, how did you come to this way of thinking?**

I'm progressive in the sense that while I draw from past thinkers and traditions, I don't feel constrained by the past. I believe new and better ways of thinking are possible. We learn new information in other domains of life and propose new theories. Why not do so in theology? No one can figure out God fully, but I think we can make progress. Traditionalists often don't realize that past Christians constructed their theologies in response to the concerns of their day. And they were shaped by the science and philosophy of their times. I think the gospel of love is always in need of reformulating in light of fresh insights. The task of theology is ongoing.

**There are various types of 'progressive' Christian theologies, particularly in the US. Do you see yourself as aligned with any?**



The general label I prefer to describe my views is "Open and Relational Theology." This is a big tent group that includes more conservative and liberal people. What those under the tent share in common are 1) the view that God and creation move through time into an open future. And 2) God and creation are relational -- in fact, interrelated. Relational theology says we affect God, and God affects us. Most in the Open and Relational tent also emphasize creaturely freedom, love, engagement with sciences and arts, and the possibility of transformation, More specifically, I consider myself a theologian of love. To me, the issues of love are central to making sense of God and creation. My wife was teasing me that "love" appears in most of my book titles or subtitles. "Aren't you getting tired of talking about love?" she asked. I replied that I explore many topics, but love is always at play in my thinking. Love is the reason I'm a Christian, and to me, love matters most.

**You remain a part of the 'Church of the Nazarene' - a Wesleyan Holiness tradition - do you find a warm welcome for your thinking?**

I'm an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene. I've been an elder for 30+ years in this denomination. I grew up attending Nazarene churches, attended a Nazarene college and seminary, and taught at Nazarene educational institutions. Many of my friends are part of this tradition.

My theology gets mixed reactions from fellow Nazarenes. Some think I'm too liberal. I've been called "the antichrist" more than once! Others see my views as aligned with the focus on love in John Wesley's theology and the broader holiness tradition. Wesleyan holiness theologies emphasize our free responses to God and the possibility of transformation from a life oriented toward sin to one oriented toward love.

My theology fits these Wesleyan themes nicely. But as I see it, I offer a more rigorous and coherent account of those ideas in light of contemporary life. And I'm willing to push boundaries in ways that make more conservative people nervous.

**Tell us about your efforts for the Church of the Nazarene to move to full inclusion of LGBT folk.**

I changed my mind about queer issues in the early 1990s. But I stayed in the Church of the Nazarene hoping to encourage the denomination to change by working from within. In recent years, my efforts caught the attention of more conservative voices. I've faced hearings and trials, and I've recently been charged with teaching doctrines contrary to the denomination's view on human sexuality. As I write this in January 2024, a trial date is yet to be set. In 2023, my daughter and I co-edited the book *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should be Fully*

*LGBTQ+ Affirming*. It featured 90+ essays from current and former Nazarenes. Not surprisingly, the book created a storm in the denomination. Our goal, however, is not primarily controversy; our goal is to see the denomination become queer-affirming.

**The US seems, from here at least, to be in the grip of a series of power struggles, sometimes referred to as the 'culture wars'. Do you see this reflected in the Church or theological academy?**

Politics has always influenced the church and theology. But in the USA, the influence seems greater than ever. And it wears on me!

I'm attracted to explanations that say some people are attracted to Authoritative views of parenting, society, and God. Other people affirm Nurturant views of parenting, society, and God. Others are attracted to Permissive perspectives. As I see it, theologies and political strategies that fit Jesus' words and ministry align with Nurturant thinking.

**What is your hope for the future of the Church in the USA?**

My grand hope is that love becomes the centre of theology and church life. That's my hope for all people on the planet, in fact, and for all creatures capable of love. My more specific hope is that more Christians stop trying to force Authoritarian views upon society. I yearn for a church willing to use persuasion and reason to explore how we might live well together.

In the USA, a large number of former Evangelicals have left their faith traditions. They are deconstructing. Most don't seem to have any idea where they might land, in terms of belief and theology. I think the Open and Relational theological vision can be immensely helpful to those who are or have deconstructed. I'm working with [popular podcaster and author] Tripp Fuller on an online class, book, and lecture series we call "God After Deconstruction." I hope these ideas will help people dissatisfied with the traditional theologies they were handed and those who want a theology that makes sense of their deepest intuitions.



# The Power of Mystical Poetry

## **God Lives in Your Depths**

*In the depths of your consciousness,  
God waits  
for you to discover  
your true Self.*

*This is an actual experience.*

*You are much more than you think.*

Mystical consciousness has been my spiritual practice for decades. In an intentional, thought-free state of heightened awareness, I sense God's consciousness all around me. Here I find peace, joy, and love. I receive insights about God's nature and how our absorption in it transforms our lived experience. In my 75<sup>th</sup> year, I took a sabbatical from professional activities to deepen this immersion. I wanted to fully imbibe the mystical life I had written about for a quarter century. Not only did I remain in its thrall, I began writing mystical poetry.

What's it like to write in mystical consciousness? Picture an old monk sitting at a table before a softly glowing ancient manuscript. In the shadowy quiet, illuminated by a single candle, the monk merges his consciousness with the all-pervading Presence. Holding a quill pen dipped in ink, he awaits inspiration for the next line of sacred poetry. I am like this ageing monk, working alone in hallowed space, I write from the deep sanctity of spirit.

But there is more. When he is finished, the old monk steps out into the light of Creation. This, too, is part of my practice, for after writing, I venture out with my dog, Oona, into nature's now-enchanted wonderland to witness neighbours' yards overflowing with vibrant colors of rhododendron, hydrangea, and dogwood blossoms along a road sheltered by whispering pines. Everything is highlighted by Puget Sound's sparkling waters that surround our island home. Soil, bushes, ferns, and grasses tease me with complex fragrances, luring me further into the world's mystery. Like the Tarot's Fool, I wave happily at each passing walker, loving everyone I meet. Then, while Oona enjoys a new scent on our path, I stand mesmerized before Creation's latest greatest show, joy swelling my heart. Finally, resting on a bench, I am overcome with gratitude for the generous gifts of nature's sacred incarnation. In this way, my life begins anew.

Some people approach the divine through Scripture, others through ideas, beliefs, and intuitions. The mystic seeks direct experience of the divine to explore its perceptual, emotional, and metaphysical nature. For the mystic, the entire universe is conscious and alive, saturated by an all-encompassing eternal and loving Presence. Those who awaken from the ego-driven, patriarchal dream of reality discover who and where they really are - divine beings in a divine world. Mystical poetry



**John Robinson** is a clinical psychologist, interfaith minister, mystic, and author.

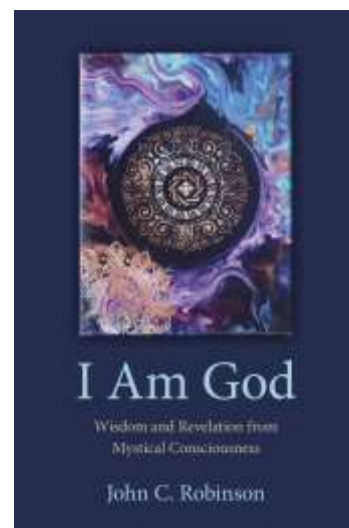
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awakens us to this transfigured world, a vision embraced by Rumi, Kabir, Hafez, Whitman and so many other poets who leave ecstatic, liberating, and radically hopeful footprints.

Poetry written in mystical consciousness carries spiritual energy. It awakens the same states, perceptions, and realizations in the reader. To accelerate this awakening, I encourage people to read mystical poems aloud, discuss them with friends, use selected lines as mantras, prayers, or silent contemplation. Approaching the verses with a still and silent mind lets poetry become a personal workshop for mystical realization.

The logical brain categorizes the world as objects – house, tree, rock, person. The mystical brain sees the world as subjects, each mysterious and alive, conscious and sacred, all living together in Eden. In mystical consciousness, we discover the enchanted land we left in early childhood, woven of mystery, magic, and myth. Talking animals, welcoming trees, singing streams, great mountains, and divinity itself respond to our presence. Entering this world, we share the awe of Creation. Let's awaken our God-nature. The widespread experience of this purer state of consciousness will bring the next stage of humanity's spiritual evolution.

I left the world of compulsive doing to recite poetry in the luminous Garden of divine being. I invite you to join me there. Listen, the songbirds are singing sacred verse! Come visit me at [i-am-god.net](http://i-am-god.net) and [facebook.com/becomingspirit](https://facebook.com/becomingspirit) to sample and receive the inspired poetry of *I Am God: Wisdom and Revelation from Mystical Consciousness*.





# Imagined teachings of Jesus

## Three young pharisees

The next Sabbath, after Jesus had spoken in the synagogue at Chorazin, three young Pharisees came to him. They possessed bright, supple minds and had many questions for Jesus. "Rabbi" said the first of them, "we study under the Pharisees in Jerusalem. We have heard about the greatness of your wisdom and the wonder of your works, so we pledged to visit you in person and see for ourselves." Jesus looked at them. "You must be eager to learn, my friends, if you have travelled all this way by foot with such a load." The three young Pharisees looked at each other, confused by Jesus' words. "Rabbi" replied the second, "what load do you speak of? We have indeed travelled by foot, but only carry basic provisions." "Such minds as yours" said Jesus, smiling, "would need a farmer's cart to hold all your questions, and four donkeys to pull it from Jerusalem to Chorazin."

The three young Pharisees laughed and Jesus directed them to the shade of a large fig tree in the garden of the synagogue. He picked several ripe figs and distributed them between the young Pharisees and asked for a jug of water to be brought from the well. "You may each ask me one question", said Jesus as he sat down on the dry, yellow grass. "And I will answer each of your questions with a picture."

The one who was yet to speak asked the first question. "Rabbi, what is the difference between the truths of men and the truths of God?"

Jesus looked up and saw an eagle gently circling high in the warm blue sky. "Consider the birds of the air" he said. "To feed their young they must partly consume the prey before passing it to them. Only so, will the young be nourished and grow to maturity." Jesus turned to the young Pharisees. "Such are the truths of men - half truths, broken up and served to juvenile minds." Jesus paused, and looked back to where the eagle continued to circle. "But the truths of God, they are like the food of the mature eagle. With great patience, wisdom and skill it must hunt its prey. Such food is not prepared and served, but consumed raw and whole. Such are the truths of God - full truths for mature minds."

As Jesus finished saying these things one of his followers brought a large jug of water and four clay mugs. Jesus poured the water, which sparkled in the light, and gave a mug to each of the young Pharisees. The young Pharisee who had first addressed Jesus spoke next.

"You have answered well Rabbi. We can see that the reports of your wisdom were justified. But what do you say of the distinction between faith and works? Which has priority in the eyes of God?"



## Robin Drummond

works in education, lives near Reading with his wife and two boys and attends the Galilee group.

"Consider the plants of the field" said Jesus. "They require but two things - water and light. A plant with light but little water stands tall, but is brittle and easily broken; and a plant with water but little light has colour but is weak. But the plant which has enough water and enough light is both upright and strong." Jesus put his hand on the trunk of the fig tree. "We are like the plants and trees of the field. Faith is our light, giving us vision. Works are our water, giving us compassion and humanity. Such is the distinction between faith and works and neither has priority in the eyes of God."

The one who had yet to ask a question then turned to Jesus. "Rabbi, I've never heard such answers before. They shine not only with truth but with joy also. My question is this - what is man's place in the world?" Jesus looked at the young Pharisee and smiled. "You have saved the best question until last." He continued. "Listen to the parable of the stolen child. In a mighty kingdom a prince was born - the first and only to a great king. Shortly after his birth, the child was stolen by an enemy of the king, who was bitter and resentful of the king's great land. The child was taken to a distant city, far beyond the king's reach and where he would never be found. As the child grew, he was treated as a servant and never told of his true origin. When he was old enough to fend for himself, he was thrown out of the enemy's house, onto the streets, where he became a thief. One day an angel appeared to the prince, who was now a young man. 'Thief, listen to me. Truly I tell you, you are not who you think you are. You were born prince to a mighty king and heir to a great kingdom. You are of the highest descent and the noblest blood. Truly I tell you, a time is coming when you will return to your kingdom and take up the throne. At that time I shall return.'"

"Tell me, what do you think the prince did next?" "Surely" said one of them, "the angel's words will appear to him as a daydream, as wishful thinking, and he will continue in his deceitful ways, for such is all he has known." "I disagree," said another, "the words of the angel will awaken in him the truth of his origin, however confusing and unclear it may appear. He will change his ways and live in preparation for the angel's return." Jesus looked at the three young Pharisees, his smile now replaced by sobriety. "You have both answered truly. Such is man's place in the world, and such is his response."

# Defining God

Some may think that there is no need to define "God". Others may think that "God" is not susceptible to definition. Still others may think that the perceived nature of "God" will be diminished if you try to define the term. If you ask people what they imagine "God" to be you are likely to elicit a variety of responses, and recent articles, surveys and personal conversation suggest to me that within the Christian community ideas are ranging from a father-like figure through to colour, music, light, creative force/power, to spirit and love, and embrace much else besides. Would the reluctance to define also extend to terms that people use to express their imagination? Would objections be raised, for example, to distinguishing music from light by relying upon appropriate definitions of the terms? Until recently I was of the view that the word "God" was now being used in so many different ways that it was substantially indeterminate in scope and could embrace just about anything. Part of the reason for holding this view, perhaps, was that I was still thinking in terms of "God" necessarily being limited to some sort of perceived "entity" and perhaps interpreting the term "entity" too narrowly. The fact that some people are now thinking of "God" in terms of such diverse ways as "person", "not a person", "sound", and "light", suggests to me that a meaningful definition, setting out the scope of the term (as now used in the Christian community), might be possible, if not clouded by entity-based restrictions, and I offer the following as a result. Like it or not "God" is a three-letter code used in human communication. If someone is using the code to refer to imagined "light" they will convey a very different message from someone who is using the term to convey imagined "sound" and there is very little justification (in my opinion) for assuming that a reference to "God" will generate a consistent range of perceptions/imaginings in a congregation, or other group of listeners, without those present adhering to an agreed code (definition). Dictionaries are useful for indicating how words are commonly used but even then, a range of uses can be associated with a single word, and context is often necessary to decide which use is appropriate. Given the seemingly vast range of perceptions now being generated by the term "God", is a meaningful definition of the term possible? My preferred dictionary lists eight different uses of the term, not all of which are religious, and none of which seem to embrace the full range of imaginings seemingly entertained within the Christian community of today.

In science, it is common practice to try and bring data obtained by observation and/or experiment under a general principal, and it seems to me that



**Chris Vosper** is a retired Senior Patent Examiner (mainly in aerospace), a Methodist (progressive) and is married with grandchildren.

this sort of approach may have some merit in trying to bring human perceptions and imaginings under a general term, "God", that might enable meaningful communication and shared understanding in a modern-day Christian context.

I suggest the following items of data could be useful for defining the scope of the term "God" as used in Christian communities today:

- 1) The term "God" elicits a diverse range of human perceptions, some of which appear contradictory (e.g., "a person", "not a person".)
- 2) The term "God" is a human construct used in human communication.
- 3) The term "God" is usually associated (at least in Christian circles) with perceived optimal relationships embracing the potential for perceived communication (e.g., prayer).
- 4) The ideas associated with the term "God" are perceived as being of universal significance.

I further suggest that these items are capable of being drawn together by the following definition.

**Any way of thinking, through which an individual can acquire a sense (inner feeling) of optimal relationship with other individuals and the rest of the universe or sustain the hope for such relationship.**

Clearly such a definition would identify "God" as human creation but so are all the different imaginings being used to give "God" substance. It seems to me there is much evidence to support the contention that "God" is created in our image as much as the other way round. That is not to deny the possibility of "feedback", in which the perceptions we create in our minds can influence the future perceptions we create, potentially blinding



God by Nick Youngson CC BY-SA 3.0 Alpha Stock Images



us to the diversity of perceptions being created elsewhere and inhibiting the potential to develop a shared vision with the rest of humankind, or at least a hope thereof.

The Biblical stories/accounts, concerning Jesus, promote ways of thinking in which “optimal relationship” involves people mutually valuing each other. Valuing each other, in turn, promotes human behaviour consistent with that valuation. Since people are dependent for their survival on the environment they inhabit, valuing each other leads to valuing the environment. Valuing each other also is material to avoiding self-destruction (e.g., through conflict) of the human species. “God”, as above defined, in combination with said stories/accounts, when taken in proper context, is therefore a potential survival asset in the modern world.

“Any way of thinking” leading to “a sense of optimal relationship” (or hope thereof), involving valuation of all other people and of the environment, implies no way of thinking, leading to this valuation outcome, should take precedence over any other way of thinking leading to the same outcome. Promoting one way of thinking (e.g., Creationism) over another should, I suggest, be avoided as it could eventually threaten universal perception of (or hope for) optimal relationship. (The routes to potential optimal relationships are diverse it seems.) That is not to say that different ways of thinking cannot be shared.

New ways of thinking, still leading to a sense of optimal relationship or sustaining the hope thereof, are likely to arise as human understanding evolves. This suggests to me that the proposed definition is “future-proof”, at least to some extent.

While the definition has the potential, I believe, to make people feel included, some of the traditional ideas about “God” do not and are more in keeping with the ways people used to think, than with the ways many people seem to be thinking now. It seems to me that nearly every church service I attend has some or other reference to “God” as creator of everything. I seriously question how this perception can meaningfully be reconciled with the perceptions some apparently hold of “God” or be divorced from our own creativity and subjectivity. Further, if taken to its logical conclusion - that God created us and everything about us - it is difficult not to assign responsibility for everything that happens to “God” and deny any free will. Ironically one might be tempted to conclude that “God”, directly, or indirectly, created atheism. Perhaps the time has come for churches to let go of their traditional liturgies and creeds and devise communication approaches more in keeping with the way human understanding is evolving. Is this a bridge too far? Maybe, but is it reasonable to expect churches to survive if they are not prepared to cross it?

# The Force

Force  
of good  
of joy  
of hope  
of peace  
Burst forth  
Break through  
Permeate the barriers we erect  
Infiltrate our minds  
Drive our bodies  
Surge through our systems.  
Are you waiting for us to turn on the switch?  
Must we participate in this process of empowerment?  
Need we be involved?  
Sorry, busy.  
Sorry, involved elsewhere.  
Sorry, tired.  
Force  
of patience  
of trust  
of partnership  
Don't give up on us.

Ana Gobledale

<https://worshipwords.co.uk>

# God?

I appreciate PV articles on God, but I experience three basic problems which can cause frustrating confusion: 1. In many contexts God is described as this or that. My response: ‘who says?’ 2. I rarely know what a writer or ritual actually means by the term ‘God’. 3. The apparent inconsistency of God as being loving or almighty. Consider Gaza! I suggest many of us might like a fresh understanding to be unearthed. So, I am writing a book about ‘God’ in relation to racism. Comments very welcome.

Richard Tetlow

March 2024 | 17

# Sketch: A Vicar's Dilemma

*The church is old with medieval wall paintings.*

*The vicar is standing inside the church door when it is opened slowly, cautiously, and two young theology students enter.*

Vicar. Good morning.

Man & Woman. Good morning.

Vicar. I'm Mike, the vicar. Are you here to arrange a marriage? We're just about to hold a service. I'd be pleased to talk to you about the church afterwards. This is an Anglican Church, a Church of England. Are you practising Church of England?

Man. Well, no, oh, yes... I don't know... We'll wait outside...

*Later ...*

Man. We're not marrying (*they giggle*) we're both theology students, we are studying... we have to find out something about origins, rites, rituals, how people see God in different churches.

Vicar. I see. Have you been baptised?

*The two young people look towards each other.*

Woman. Yes, I guess so, as babies probably.

Vicar. Well, as you doubtless know, this church has rites of passage and rituals, just as other religions have their rituals, Bar Mitzvah in the Jewish community, for example. I can only speak for the Church of England. Rites and Rituals play a large part in our introductions to and participation in the church and its membership. Some actions are repeated in many of the services.

Man. Of course. That's the sort of thing we are looking at. We've done the value of rites and rituals and how they hold people.

Vicar. Mmm, I would say that the church is no different.

Woman. So to belong to the church you have to go through a rite? Does it mean that everyone has to agree with it?

*The Vicar pauses to check if they are serious.*

Vicar. When you commit yourself to anything, when you sign up to it, it presumes you agree with it. We run confirmation courses to teach people what the church believes. You can come to church whatever you believe but to belong to the church, to receive communion, well, the Church of England, as I said, has its recognised rites and rituals which...

Man. Yeah, but when my grandma graduated she had to curtsy to the guy dishing out the certificates. We won't have any of that but we will still graduate.

Vicar. Yes, well, part of the Church liturgy uses more or less the same words every time - maybe with slight variations, but basically the same. There is the ritual that goes with the rite, in the church - firstly Baptism, admitting the person to the church, then confirmation when they take on responsibilities for their beliefs and then when receiving communion - receiving bread and wine -



**Dorrie Johnson** is retired, a disheartened Anglican priest (Minister in Secular Employment) and a committed Quaker attender.

*The young couple regard him, respectfully.*

Each time the person says, either I believe.. or we believe in... to follow Jesus' instructions laid down in the Bible, including repentance for disregarding ...

*The man interrupts.*

Man. Repentance of sin? Do people know what sin is? I mean is all that explained to a person, and the Bible and all that?

Woman. We've been studying the Bible. Are you saying that despite all the knowledge gathered by scholars, the Bible is to be read as a single book without regard as to who wrote it, or when, or why, but as exactly expressing God's truth?

Vicar. Yes, of course. Possibly not word for word as words change their meaning over the centuries, but yes, the church teaches that it is the Word of God.

*The two young people nod, cautiously*

Vicar. The beliefs and ministry of the members of the congregation are expressed through their active participation together in the words and actions of the service, but also by some of them reading the Bible passages, leading the prayers and, if authorized, assisting with the distribution of the bread and the wine.

*The girl is gazing around the church but she seems to be listening.*

Vicar. These are the rites and rituals of the church. People are drawn together, they share the observances, read the same words. People say together the words of the Creed which spells out the church's belief.

Man. Just a minute, Are you saying that all the churches believe exactly the same things?

Vicar. Yes, of course, well in outline. Churches of England like this one, anyway, They all believe that God made the world as in the book of Genesis - *in the*



<https://pxhere.com/en/photo/725455> CC0 Public Domain



beginning - the Bible expresses God's truth... God's truth is absolute no matter when it was written.

Man. But surely the context matters – when it was written and who wrote it and why? We've been taught that some of the Bible text was inherited from the Hebrew Bible.

*He pronounces, as if by memory, from a recent essay*

In the 3rd Century BCE, texts were translated into Greek in a collection of scrolls. Some were not included in some Protestant Bibles. Then there was a Synod of Hippo, then the Roman Emperor legalised the Christian Church in 313 CE in, in some Edict... Then in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century Jerome translated it into Latin. He included older books and he changed the order of the Gospels.

*He pauses but the vicar seems to be listening intently. The woman picks it up:*

Woman. King James 1 of England in 1611 had a new English translation of the Bible *then counting on her fingers* – the revised Standard Version (1952), the New International Version (1978) the New Revised Standard Version (1989). All of them, probably, stuck with early century thinking. The church, we were told, still teaches that Earth was created in six 24-hour days, calculated as c. 6000 CE and was later drowned in a worldwide flood, and that it is flat with heaven above and hell beneath.

*She pauses for breath then adds*

It's right - we've looked at all those Bibles ...

Vicar. Excuse me. I don't know if you know who you are talking to..

Woman. Oh, sorry.

*The young man picks up the conversation again.*

Man. We just mean we've been told in our lectures that it is hard now for the church to show relevance. I mean if the church is trying to serve people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but using 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century declarations and examples? Are they relevant? Creeds, prayer and beliefs, for example. In all those things we were told the church believes in, being born sinful, a virgin having a baby, atonement, ascension, prayer, they are frozen in time when a three-tiered universe was accepted and are recited without thought. All the rites and rituals go on repeating...

*The Vicar seems bemused or amused.*

Vicar. Look, both of you - these beliefs of the church – is it polite to come in here pretending to be interested and doubting my words with every other breath.

Woman. Sorry, it's just that we're doing religions and art and society and meaning and ritual and what God is ... and it doesn't seem to fit.

Vicar. Well, look at the walls then, but don't come in here taking the name of God in vain.

Man. Ah, that's interesting. Do you have to know what God is before you can take God's name in vain?

Vicar. Now what are you talking about?

Man. About God. The whole ontological argument. Deism v Theism. Does God even exist?

*The young woman is nodding fervently. She quotes again, sounding a little more unsure.*



Woman. Yes, did God want the church or the church like it is? There have been so many discoveries from the ancient mathematicians and philosophers that were either ignored or unknown by the developing church. I mean that the earth orbiting the sun then Aristotle then Copernicus then Galileo...

Vicar. Are you teaching me church history...?

*The man again takes over the conversation.*

Man. No, no, of course not, and anyway the Pope apologised for the church in 1992. But then there was Robert Hooke and his discovery of gravity - though Isaac Newton picked it up and ran with it. Alongside these findings, the church under its various popes, decreed the truth.

Vicar. So now you are challenging the pope! I think...

*He sits, heavily, on the end of a pew.*

Man. I am not challenging the Pope except when scientific, religious or cosmological views seem to be out of kilter then I need to see who has the argument on their side. Surely the reason, logic and scientific upheaval in the Age of Enlightenment challenged Christianity and lessened its authority? Then Darwin rocked and shocked the church when he published On The Origin of the Species in 1859. All those apes in the house of Lords. *(He giggles, the Vicar smiles cautiously.)* These concepts of evolution, common descent and natural selection suggested that Man was not unique. Belief is not just about words.

Vicar. Right, young man - and you haven't even told me your name, yet, but If you want to be priests...

Man & Woman. We don't want to be priests or ministers or anything, we want to know about theology.

Man. We can't make sense of it or how people believe in God. All those rites... All those words... Most of human history, cosmology and religion have been closely intertwined, and that still was the case during the scientific revolution. But, more recent developments in physics and astronomy give us a cosmological view that challenges the belief in a divinely created world. Billions of neutrons, protons, electrons, anti-electrons (positrons), photons, and neutrinos... So many ... and you - you keep saying 'the church believes...'; you haven't said 'I believe...'

*He stops suddenly, pauses to catch his breath. The Vicar takes over the conversation.*

Vicar. If I may continue - of course belief is not just about words. The traditions of different churches can vary. There are different practices of religion which mean that not all Christians, maybe not even in the same church, experience things the same way.

There are other ways of looking at God, of course. Process Theology understands God as relational, the Mystics talk of the Cosmic Christ - that literature covers centuries, not just decades - or the God that could be real, there is talk of an emergent God that recognises spirituality and science or the Universal God and more. If you are interested come back and I will tell you more about them, and why I believe that God would not abandon this creation.

Experience is vital in responding to God. Church mantras develop, our understanding changes but yes, the church can become stuck in words. Few of them express relationships. Much depends on the thinking. Many good people have been dismissed from the church or by the church because they questioned / disagreed with the dogma. Now, instead of rejoicing about a mind-boggling creation ... we talk of those attending church as the children of God. Maybe, maybe, perhaps we don't want to be adult...

Man. All that we wanted to say ...

Vicar. Will you be quiet, young man, for goodness sake, and listen for once.

*He breathes deeply.*

Vicar. You were trying to tell me, I believe, that things had changed. Yes, that it true, including the view we have of a three-tiered universe made in days. Recognisably human remains have been dated as 300,000 years old.

Scientists have calculated that Earth, our world, our planet as we might just begin to recognise it, is 4.54 billion years old with an error range of 50 million years. We now know that 13 billion light years ago, or so, there was an implosion of space. It seems that the universe grew by billions of years after it came into existence exhibiting an energy long before there was light.

I believe in a God of consciousness, God Creator who set the whole evolutionary process in action. Don't you think I've thought of these things? Don't you think one of my deepest regrets is that I won't live long enough for the next chapter? Don't you think that I want to explore our faith, the faith of the church, in view of all the new understanding, all the new knowledge? The church has had to look at itself before and it will again.

Go back to your lecturers and ask them about creation. Remind them that humans and cabbage have about 40-50% DNA in common. Ask them about spirals in the galaxies and snail shells and the cochlea in your ear; ask about the link between turtle shells, carbon, dragonfly eyes, honeycomb. Ask them about black holes and quarks. Ask them about Chinese cosmology - philosophy of Ying Yang and quantum entanglement, small things the size of an atom seen on the microscope slide; about tardigrades ...

Woman. I thought you were going to talk about the church...

Vicar. I am, I am, young woman, whose name I do not yet know, I should have asked you what you meant by 'church' - people, buildings, God, language of worship.

I am bilingual. One language for you, another for the faithful people who come in here week by week.

I wish when they light their candles I could talk of Light, of light years. I wish, when the words we recite make us seem unimportant, of little consequence, that we could consider evolution. I wish, I wish I could talk of space racing, expanding away from us while they think grandad is up there looking down on them.

Do you think I don't worry about them and also the potential physicists in the congregation, students like you perhaps, who think because I stick to preaching conventions mean that I believe in them without explanation, without reference to their context? 5 minutes usually, for a sermon before people are restless. Don't you think I wish I could say that we have the responsibility to describe creation now, to talk of climates and primates, of space and the human race risking destruction of this wonder that can be described by physics, mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, physiology, science, biology, philosophy ... and the greatest wonder of all - Love.

Go, young people. May you find your God. Change the world if you can. May the God of Consciousness, the God of Wonder, the God of Creation be your yardstick (*and murmuring to himself*) and if there is One creator then that One God is God of all faiths, by whatever image we envision and by whatever we call that God?

*Simultaneously the young couple utter their thanks, not yet understanding.*

Man. Did you understand what he said about God? Do you think he meant for us to go and talk to our tutors?

Woman. Yes, I think he did, some of them, anyway.

*They left but at the door they turned.*

*It was just the sun, wasn't it, shining through the stained glass in the window, that shone round the person now waving and smiling at them*

## What God Is

*God is not what you think or believe.*

*Rather than as giant person-like figure,  
God is an infinite, intelligent, omnipresent,  
energy-consciousness of  
love, bliss, and creativity  
saturating everything with its essence.*

*Experiencing God,  
we awaken divine love in our own being.  
We move from small self to cosmic Self to  
discover*

*the one we have been praying to  
all our lives is who we already are.*

**John Robinson**



# Local groups

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

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

Following the 20th Anniversary of meeting in Reading, we were pleased to have an online meeting with our Chair, Simon Cross, in Dec. Carrying on the theme from the meeting, Simon challenged us to consider what PCN Britain's focus should be as an organisation in the coming years. After a shared meal in Jan, our Feb meeting picked this up and we discussed the topic of the shared values that Christianity, along with other religions and philosophical ideologies, can promote to achieve a sustainable future for the whole of humanity. Ideas from Lloyd Geering and Gretta Vosper challenged us to think beyond our more familiar Christianity box. We intend to follow this overall theme with thinking about what prayer can mean in a world beyond belief, Gretta Vosper's ideas will again be a prompt for our discussion. In Mar, Apr, May and Jun our usual online meetings will be held on the first Tue each month.

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

We are continuing discussion of Diana Butler Bass's book "Christianity after Religion" – subtitled "The end of the church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening". Having reached ch.7 "The Great Reversal" in Oct we considered her Statement "the Great Reversal is the Great Returning of Christianity back toward what Jesus preached: a beloved and beloved community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God's reign of mercy and justice". Some of us could that see that happening in some places and hoped that it might be true in many others. It is surely what the world needs? In Nov we will have looked at ch.8 – "Great Awakening". Looking ahead I read "... the great awakenings in American history were all Christian revitalization movements that brought personal piety and also brought transformation in the society. But the next great awakening will

have to be an interfaith awakening". It sounds like we will be having some challenging discussion. On 7th Dec we will be looking at the last chapter "Performing awakening". Normally our meetings continue to be on the first Wed each month at 1.30 until 3 pm, always ending with some moments of silent prayer. We meet face to face at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. In addition, for those who find Zooming helpful, especially for those living at a distance from Bolton, we send out a link each month to those who have indicated they wish to join us.

**Cornwall** Gwen Wills  
gwen.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

We have had some interesting discussions over the past few sessions. In Nov the group discussed 'What do we mean when we say God?' This subject formed the basis of our very first meeting at the beginning of last year but new members missed it the first time around and everyone agreed that they would like to revisit that discussion. In Dec we met up at a local pub for a pre-Christmas meal which we enjoyed so much that we considered the said pub as a possible venue for future meetings! In Jan the group convenor's brothel tour while on holiday in Western Australia formed the basis of a discussion on the ethics of the sex industry and its implications for women's self-worth and well being. We continue to meet on the second Tue of the month at 7.30pm in the Green Room, Fraddon Village Hall.

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

We enjoy meeting in person, booking space on the second Tue evening of each month in the city centre Brunswick Methodist Church. In Nov our discussions followed a viewing of a short video 'The Open Narrative of Love' featuring the theologian, Lieven Boeve. He says, "It is in our ordinary lives that God reveals himself." We pondered the meaning of the phrase 'the theology of interruption' taking much food for thought from our deliberations. As Christmas approached, we were entertainingly led through "A Christmas Carol" by Joyce, who

summarised the plot bringing to life the metaphors of fog, cold etc for Scrooge's mindset prior to the eventual warming of his heart and hearth. Then most recently, James offered us a wide-ranging menu of progressive views of Jesus, moving on from the set views of orthodoxy. This was another thought-provoking evening including the thought from John Dominic Crossan "Jesus is what God looks like in sandals."

**Northallerton** Peter Brophy  
01609 761182 peter.brophy@pcnbritain.org.uk

We celebrated our first anniversary in February, having enjoyed twelve months of excellent discussions based on a number of books by progressive writers. Currently we're looking at Brian McLaren's "The great spiritual migration: how the world's largest religion is seeking a better way to be Christian". We meet on the first Tuesday of the month, 2.00 for 2.30 in the Garden Room at Romanby Methodist Church.

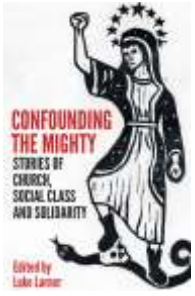
**Teesside** Peter Brophy  
01609 761182 peter.brophy@pcnbritain.org.uk

In Jan we started working through a new book, "Do I stay Christian? a guide for the doubters, the disappointed and the disillusioned" by Brian McLaren. Having ploughed through the rather depressing Part 1 - all the reasons to leave Christianity - we turned in Feb to the much more positive Part 2, why to stay. March will see us looking at the 'how' of being Christian despite all the problems of both belief and the institutional church. New members would be very welcome: 2.00 for 2.30 on the second Tuesday of the month at the Great Ayton Friends' Meeting House.

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

The last meeting of 2023 and the first of 2024 both took the form of a discussion on Tony Rutherford's "Meeting Christianity Again for the First Time". As I write we are looking forward to perhaps a series of meetings based on the ten questions posed by Brian McLaren in his "A New Kind of Christianity". For a number of different reasons our numbers have dwindled since the Pandemic and we would welcome new members. Anyone interested is asked to contact the Convenor via the PCN website.

# Reviews



## Confounding the Mighty ed. Luke Lerner, SCM Press

The issue of social class is complex and multi-layered, being charitable we might say that perhaps this is one of the reasons that

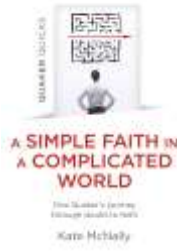
it is so infrequently addressed in discussions of church and Christian theology. That is, however, not a good enough reason for it to be so very overlooked – which is why this edited collection of essays on issues of social class is very welcome. The book is relatively slim, and its authors come to the topic from various perspectives. Both factors have positive and negative aspects – on the one hand, while it is highly readable, it is simply impossible for a book of this size to adequately address all the different ideas and problems associated with the topic in hand. Especially as an edited volume like this tends to require space for authors to identify themselves and explain their approaches each time a new chapter begins. In this case it also means that there's no single definition of social class which threads through all the contributions.

But what the book may, necessarily, lack in depth, it makes up for in passion. Lerner's own contributions border on the polemical as he urges other working-class Christians towards solidarity. Of the other contributions, particularly strong voices emerge from a range of backgrounds, Sally Mann, a Baptist minister in East London uses a sociological lens to address her inner city ministry experiences, while Eve Poole relies upon Bourdieu to help her consider the vexed question of theological education.

Although there are writers from non-conformist church traditions, there is a slight bias towards Anglican experience within the text, perhaps no great surprise. It does beg, though, for a follow up with a range of perspectives from outside of that particular bubble. A welcome initial exploration of the subject – more please!

**Simon Cross**

## A Simple Faith in a Complicated World by Kate McNally, John Hunt



This short book is part of the Quaker Quick series. As the title suggests, it charts the author's faith journey which she describes as finding 'the faith of Jesus rather than the faith about

Jesus'. She charts her discomfort with her experience in mainstream churches and speaks of meeting the Quakers as 'coming home'. She helpfully describes Quaker values or 'testimonies', and goes on to explain Quaker practices and the understanding of what ministry is in their context. The reader is invited to consider an alternative Trinity, that of God, self and others which is explained more fully in subsequent chapters. It finishes with the Quaker call to 'let our lives speak' and gives examples of their work in many different environments.

Whilst this book was an 'easy' read, it had great depths and profound truths within it. The critique of some aspects of theology was interesting but what most impressed me was the unpacking of Quaker ways of being and connecting as a community and in the world.

I would recommend this book for anyone who wanted a basic but challenging understanding of Quakerism. Church leaders may find the descriptions of prayer and practice described, a healthy model of how to listen to God and others and to lead well.

This small book had a big impact on me. It challenged me to reconsider prayer, the language of worship, and the way of being a faith community. The writer acknowledges that it can be a hard path but states, 'I believe that bringing the kingdom of God to earth is about bringing the love of God to the earth. One person, one action at a time.' Amen.

**Meryl White**



# Letters

## Various PV thoughts

I agree wholeheartedly with what our editor said about the cover picture of Bethlehem Manger Square in the Dec edition of PV. All I would add is the Iona Community statement on its position I read in my local church magazine: 'A just future for Palestinians and Israelis is only possible through the establishment throughout Palestine and Israel of equal rights irrespective of religious and ethnic background and identity'. Edward Conder's poem on the inside of the front cover spoke volumes in just a few words, especially the last six lines. I also find myself a member of 'a church with beliefs opposed to my own'. I re-read Paul Onslow's article, 'But What Can I Do' from the Sept 2023 edition, so I know I am not alone in finding myself in this situation. However, Sunday worship apart, the members of my church are, almost without exception, loving, kind and considerate and do valuable work for the church and local community during the rest of the week. The other reason I stick with it that I can express my progressive views in the church magazine; better to fight my corner from within than from outside.

Turning to the letters; Paul Wilks ask for suggestions on 'Bible Study Notes'. I have found Marcus Borg's – 'Evolution of The Word' very useful, it is the New Testament printed in the order the Letters, Gospels etc. were written, starting with Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and ending the Second Letter of Peter, with lengthy introduction and explanation before each.

I agree entirely with David Kemp; I am well into my 89th year and rely greatly on PCN and PV to keep me in touch with progressive thinking. So thank you trustees and all who are working so hard to keep progressive thinking moving forward.

**George Drake**

## Corrections

Thank you for the review of my book Re-viewing the Resurrection but I need to point out that it is not self published but by Austin Macauley of 1, Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5AA @ £7.99 + £3 p&p and my email address is richardfirthfolk@gmail.com

**Richard Firth**



# Temptations

Forty day  
wilderness retreat



Mark 1:1 says it happened,  
and then Jesus proclaims,  
“The time is fulfilled, and  
the kingdom of God has  
come near; repent, and  
believe in the good news.”

After Jesus is baptised  
he spends 40 days and  
40 nights in the  
wilderness.

Matthew has 40 days of  
fasting, then three  
temptations in height order  
(ground, Temple, mountain)  
which are defeated by  
quoting Scripture.

Luke has the temptations in  
a different order (ground,  
mountain, Temple) and  
ends with the devil leaving  
“until an opportune time.”

During this time, Satan (or  
the devil) tempted him.  
(In 3 gospels – not John.)

John the Baptist is  
arrested; Jesus moves to  
Capernaum and proclaims,  
“Repent, for the kingdom of  
heaven has come near.”

The congregation of the  
Nazareth synagogue  
does not like it when the  
local boy says he’s  
fulfilling Scripture!

Jesus then tours the  
synagogues in Galilee to  
cheering crowds.  
But his return home does  
not go down so well...






The temptations are the transition between Jesus' baptism and his ministry. Between the Holy Spirit descending upon him and declaring his message.



Jump off the Temple and be caught by angels - perform miracles to keep everyone's attention.



In 40 days Jesus reflects on what happened at his baptism, struggles with what it means, and how he should proceed.



**MESSAGE**  
You can see the temptations as different ways of getting his message across.




Wield earthly power - force everyone to do as he says.



He probably did not need the embodiment of evil (the devil) to point out the possibilities, but it helps the imagery.



Stones to bread - feed everyone, make them reliant on him.



To each Jesus replies - rely on, trust, and serve God. Then he declares his message: turn back to God, for God's Kingdom is near.



In the end, Jesus places God centrally and goes from there. Rely on God, trust God, serve God, and live out God's Kingdom.