

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain

March 2012



Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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The Price of Forgiveness

by David Stevenson



David describes himself as a free agent able to go where angels (or at least many of my clerical friends) fear to tread. Maverick, loose cannon, grit in the oyster – he's happy to answer to any of these. He is most certainly a poet, and also a hymn

writer. 'Abrasive', he writes 'is not my style, but I refuse to deny my own experience because someone long ago has had a different experience and enshrined it in historic belief.'

The hymn *In Christ alone* scraped into the recently published Methodist hymn book by the skin of its teeth. Its raw contention that the wrath of God was satisfied by the totality of human sin heaped upon the crucified Jesus gave pause to the compilers of *Singing the Faith*. Permission to revise the wording was refused, but still the hymn was accepted for inclusion. The editors drew comfort from the knowledge that other hymns in the collection took a different view.

Whatever we may think of that judgement, we are plainly entitled to question the theological assumptions of the hymn. The theory of penal substitution has its roots in a primeval past, envisaging an irascible God to be appeased, and perhaps also our guilt-ridden wish to accept due punishment for acknowledged misdemeanours.

Classically the obsession with sacrifice is portrayed in the near-slaughter of Isaac some

3500-4000 years ago. Astonishingly, modern commentators are frequently inclined to praise Abraham for his faithfulness. Yet anyone exhibiting such inclinations in our society would be swiftly institutionalised for their safety and ours. Thankfully we have progressed in our notions of acceptable behaviour, but not it appears in our perceptions of God.

Traditional faith envisages God as a being. Consequently it is stuck with belief in a God who acts and reacts in response to ourselves, and who intervenes in our affairs (or doesn't) in a seemingly capricious way. Our humanity is being projected onto God in an extraordinarily obvious manner. Can we do no better?

All images of God are inadequate but some are surely more inadequate than others. Suppose that God is not a being, but being itself. We are then free to engage routinely with divinity in the whole of life, but notably in its deepest experiences as we touch the fringes of infinity. We shall encounter immanence and transcendence, changeless, timeless, absolute, in the manner dreamed of by the ancients when they called God I AM.

In thinking about forgiveness we are impelled as Christians to pay close attention to the teaching and practice of Jesus. Repeatedly he laid great stress on forgiveness – in the Lord's Prayer, the seventy-times-seven injunction to Peter, and the command not to retaliate to provocation. But the flash point occurred when he audaciously pronounced the forgiveness of sins – with no formality except

the exhortation to avoid future sin, and with no reference to the supposed merit of his pending death.

Was he presuming to forgive sins as his critics assumed, or simply stating as fact that sin is forgiven? At all events it was a declaration of grace too generous for his contemporaries to accept. It subverted the sacrifice industry and the power of the priesthood, making the death of Jesus all but inevitable. Obviously many present day believers find his magnanimity equally hard to swallow.

In post-Darwinian terms we might see humanity as evolving to rise above our basic instincts of survival and self-preservation, rather than as defectors from some primordial state of perfection. If so, we're looking to the long term and glitches along the way are predictable. We may assert that Jesus was uniquely successful in overcoming the residue of our distant origins. Inspired and empowered by that same spirit, our task is therefore to promulgate the Jesus consciousness – and trust that the planet will survive long enough to acquire it!

The first disciples are repeatedly portrayed as failing to grasp the innovative ministry of Jesus. Ironically once left to their own devices they resorted to age-old categories, interpreting his death as the sacrificial lamb of Yom Kippur. Can this have been their gravest error? Certainly it became ingrained in the historic faith of the Church, but a misconception maintained in perpetuity remains a misconception.

Is the achievement of Jesus diminished if perceived as self-sacrifice, suffering servant style, for the emancipation of the human race instead of as a peace offering to an angry God? On the contrary, I would argue that it is enhanced. We may surely continue to hail him as Saviour without equivocation.

For Jesus, the price of his sublime message of free forgiveness was an agonising death on a Roman gibbet. How dare we now reduce forgiveness to the level of a commodity to be purchased?

So what's your verdict? Vision or heresy? The dividing line is generally a fine one, but progressive thinkers will not shrink from treading it.

How can progressive Christian communities be people of The Way?



PCN Britain's Annual General Meeting and Spring Conference at St Columba's United Reformed Church YO1 6EX York on Saturday May 19th 2012.

Speaker at the conference: Chris Howson

Registration from 10.30 am. AGM at 11 am.

Conference starts at 12 noon, takes a break for lunch, restarts at 2 pm, finishes at 3.30.

There will be a charge at the door of £5 to cover the cost of the conference. No charge for those attending just for the AGM.

Chris Howson is a mission priest based in Bradford, who will lead two sessions on being a Christian community in the 21st Century.

Chris is a liberation theologian and author of *A Just Church*, a book which has attracted much interest and favourable comment – not least from himself on Amazon! His current Christian community, SoulSpace, is not a typical church. On their website they declare, "We want to find new ways of understanding what the ministry of Jesus means for us today. We strive to be an inclusive community,

welcoming all people, regardless of gender, race or sexuality and we make efforts to grow in love and community with those of other faiths within Bradford." This is Liberation Theology born again at a time that so desperately needs it. Don't miss it.

Harry Bedborough a member from Mickleover, Derby, is looking for a lift to York and back, if anyone is passing his way. He is happy to share fuel costs. Please get in touch with Andy Vivian – contact details on the back page, if you can help.

Letter from the chair



Those who are in any form of ministry know what a privilege we have to share in people's deepest thinking and needs, especially at times of crisis in their lives. I also count it an immense privilege to be invited into the thinking of many members of PCN Britain, particularly through email, as they share concerns and ideas with me.

One of the 'tensions' that I have noticed over

this past year is 'knowledge' or 'action'. Some members have shared with me their joy of feeling increasingly liberated by, for example, the support in their local groups, articles in the Newsletter and the DVD resources now available from the expanding resource library. At the same time there has been an increasing number of members saying that they want less 'academia' and more 'on the ground' involvement and activity in issues of justice and peace within their local PCN Britain group.

I often remind people that PCN Britain does not 'tell' members or groups what to believe or do. A basic reason for the existence of PCN Britain is the invitation to all to journey together, exploring the questions and living out the principles that make up the Eight Points, finding answers that satisfy individuals for this moment in time.

Personally I need to keep a balance between the study of contemporary biblical scholarship and its application to the justice and peace campaigns in which I am involved. All knowledge and no activity will make little difference to the suffering in this world. However, if my activity is not grounded in

contemporary scholarship then it risks 'floating' without reason. Indeed, in explaining my own ministry, *Permission To Speak*, I make it very clear that I value the traditions of the past as being important in understanding the present, but my ministry is more concerned with spiritual truth lived in today's world than it is concerned with ritual and tradition.

With this in mind I welcome the approach of one of my heroes of present-day Christianity, Desmond Tutu who frequently says that people do not become 'free from' but they are released into being 'free for'... As I interpret this, continuously updated knowledge is needed to set me free from that which Bishop Spong calls 'the sins of scripture' into being free for living and working for justice and peace, rooted in the wisdom and work of Jesus of Nazareth discovered through contemporary progressive biblical scholarship. This is why I find membership of PCN Britain so relevant and helpful.

And now a reminder that the AGM is approaching when decisions need to be taken concerning some updates to the Constitution, and for that we need ten per cent of the membership or at least 55 members in attendance. Those who were at last year's AGM in London will recall how we almost failed to achieve the then quorum of 50. As the membership rises so does the quorum. We had a suggestion from the floor last year that the quorum should be revised to make it easier to achieve. The Management Committee took advice from the Charity Commission and we will bring back to the AGM a proposal which aims to achieve that. Notices will be distributed shortly after Easter. I encourage as many members as possible to attend on 19th May at St Columba's URC, York. An excellent speaker, Chris Howson, will follow the AGM with two sessions considering the outworking of progressive faith in local communities. [Ed: see previous page] With warmest greetings
John

Frank Godfrey writes: Almost two years ago our Gloucester group were visited by Sybil and Jerry McLeese who shared their experiences of being open liberal Christians in southern USA. Like us they greatly valued the

writings of Spong, Borg etc. but their main concern was to encourage interfaith sharing. Since returning home they have been working to create a "Free Interfaith Academy and Virtual University" in Winston Salem. And have written: "At a recent organisational meeting we envisaged

a respectful process of knowledge-sharing, community-building and peace-sharing. Through course lectures and special events we will learn about each tradition's doctrines and laws, heritage and history. We will share stories and plumb their mysteries. We will embrace new neighbours through words and experience. And we will do so with a thoroughly democratic structure of equal authority and shared responsibility. There will be no president or vice

Progressive Islam?

By Michael Wright

I value so much the PCN environment, in which ideas and experiences can be shared with like-minded people. It is a joy to be able to share such ideas without fear of others feeling threatened, or jumping down my throat with a narrow and aggressive version of the Christian faith.

I have for some years sought to have something of a similar dialogue with people of other faiths besides Christianity. For five years I was the Chair of Middlesbrough Council of Faiths. Sadly too many of our explorations of each others' traditions tended to be rather superficial. Sometimes there was even a confrontational element as those with strong convictions sought to get others to see that their way was the true one.

I have now begun a new conversation, initially one-to-one, with a man who was born and educated in law in Pakistan, and who has further legal qualifications in England, who currently works as a taxi driver. We are able to explain ourselves to each other, and learn from each other.

I have learned something of his perspective of the British rule in the Indian sub-continent. Whereas I learned at school many years ago of the civilising rule of the British Raj, from him I learned that he and his fellow countrymen see that experience largely in terms of the British exploiting the natural resources of his country. The British language, legal system, and government he tells me created a class system. The Americans have taken over the manipulation and direction of those who have risen to power in his country through the British legacy.

Such a perspective brings me to think and read afresh, to check out his perspective, and learn from it. I do not dismiss it; nor do I simply accept it as an objective observation. I find it helpful to understand a little more many of the attitudes that spring from such a perspective.

We are able to talk about different religious perspectives. The fact that I view Jesus as a great

president, just a leadership team that serves everyone.....We will have one initiator and several facilitators." Sybil and Jerry have drawn together a team that includes representatives of Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Native Indian, Hindu and Atheist faiths. They have a fascinating collection of programme ideas.

Doesn't all this sound a great way of living out our eight points? We wish them well and hope to learn more of their project.

Prophet, rather than a Divine Saviour, has been a surprise to him. In that, I have more in common with some Muslims than with some Christians. We share an open readiness to relate our different faith traditions to modern knowledge and experience. We have a shared concern to apply our religious approach to life to the issues and challenges of our own lives, and that of the communities in which we live.

I am learning something of the tribal and cultural tensions within the local Islamic community. I am finding that some of the Imams who preach on Fridays are more concerned with the minutiae of religious observance: the length of beards, whether private prayers are silent or spoken, and what men and women wear, than they are with the practical application of religious and ethical principles to daily life.

I have just subscribed to Critical Muslim – www.musliminstitute.org/critical-muslim - and we will talk about some of the articles published by them. He is lending me *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* by Mohammed Iqbal, which I will read with interest.

Sometimes we – PCN folk - feel a rather isolated minority within the Christian churches. Certainly there are many who dismiss our approach to theological issues without taking the trouble to really listen to us. I am finding an interesting parallel with a Muslim who feels himself in a similar situation within his community. He tells me there are many people who think like him: they are individuals who fear to be too open about their views because of the backlash with which those with conservative views react to them. I value having another companion on the journey of exploring faith and life: he has a different perspective again from those with whom I explore a liberal Christian theological approach.

Michael Wright was an Anglican priest, and is now a member of the Teesdale and Cleveland area meeting of the Society of Friends. He is also the media officer for PCN Britain.

News from local groups

Abingdon

(Cliff Marshall 01235 530480
cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The 'Living the Questions Group' continues to meet monthly at 7.30pm on the first Tuesday of each month. Meetings are held in church rooms which vary in denomination from month to month. Our wide publicity of our meetings is beginning to prompt questions about just what being a progressive Christian might mean. We are also making some contacts with other church-based discussion groups exploring open Christianity in the Oxford area and there is potential for some joint meetings in the future. We are continuing to use sessions from Living the Questions 2 to guide, at least initially, our wide ranging, open and accepting discussions. The likely programme for the next few months is:

6th March: Evil, Suffering & A God of Love; 3rd April: The Myth of Redemptive Violence; 1st May: Practising Resurrection; 5th June: Debunking the Rapture. Anyone wishing to come along and join the group would be most welcome. Please contact Cliff Marshall to find out more or to get details of the month's meeting place and discussion materials.

Bolton

(Jim Hollyman 01204 456050
jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Members meet at 10am till about 11.30 on the second Tuesday of alternate months. The meeting place is 1462, Junction Road West, Lostock, Bolton BL6 4EG, and the next meeting is on Tuesday 13th March. The average attendance is nine, and people are of mixed denominations and none. Newcomers always welcome, but it helps if we know you're coming. Use the email or phone number above.

We are reading and discussing Michael Taylor's book "Sorting Out Believing" - subtitled "Not Alpha but Omega"! (ISBN 978-0-9551859-3-9 published by Open House Publications at £4.50). We have had two excellent sessions and are looking forward to the 13th March meeting when we will be looking at the third chapter. After that we shall next meet on Tuesday 8th May.

Driffield

(Raymond Everleigh 01262 420062
raymond.eveleigh@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our group is 'Cornflakes Theology'. We meet on the first Wednesday of each month at *The Old Star* in Kilham, East Yorkshire. Our next meeting on March 7th will be on 'Interfaith' led by Rev. John Davis. Our next conference at Wydale Hall, near Scarborough is on Thursday 8th March and is entitled 'An Interface between the Church and Secular Society'. 10am to 4pm, fee £15.

Dundee

(Gordon Sharp 01382 643002
gordon.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

On the 6th March we'll be hearing from Graham Maule of the Iona Community - Wild Goose Resource Group. This is a joint meeting with the local Church of Scotland Guild and we'll be hearing about the Holy City events in Glasgow. These events are a combination of progressive worship and discussion. If there is interest then we will want to explore this for Dundee. Other dates are: 17th April, 22nd May and 19th June (all Tuesdays). Our meetings take place in Dundee West Church of Scotland, Perth Road (opposite the Art College) at 7.00pm.

Edinburgh

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

By the time of publication, the group will have shared 'A Meal with Jesus' at the end of February, at which members will have been invited to assume the given character of one of the persons who could have been in the company of Jesus, and might well have shared a meal with him....

In March Jean Williams will lead our discussion about 'Good News for teenagers?' In April we look forward to hearing about Buddhism from our invited speaker Favian Straughan.

In May we plan to grapple with an in-house discussion 'What is spirituality?' and to wind up the year's programme we have our usual evaluation and planning session at the end of June: 'Looking back and looking forward', which is traditionally followed by summer refreshments. As always all are welcome.

Exeter

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

At our meeting on 19th February we discussed two topics: sin (original or not!) and heaven - appropriately in that order - led by two members, emphatically not presenting talks - just triggering discussion about topics that some progressives run a mile from.

Liz, introducing sin, found the book by John Patrick Diggins about Niebuhr's thinking (*Why Niebuhr Now?* 2011) fascinating reading (and available on Kindle). I recommend those interested in discussion of political philosophy and faith, (maybe like me you remember his name being around back in the 60s?) to view an online video from 1958 to get an impression of him - http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/niebuhr_reinhold.html. Niebuhr came across to her in this as a very human, warm and highly intelligent man, taking seriously the tension between dark and light in the world and challenges any who give easy or glib answers. There are many parallels in our current predicament that raise some of the questions Niebuhr wrestled with, pragmatism versus idealism being the underlying one.

Her other reference was to Adrian Hough's *The Flaw in the Universe* (O Books 2009). A scientist, and Chaplain to the Bishop of Exeter, he likens Sin

(humankind's tendency rather than sin - individual wrongdoing) to the second law of thermodynamics - the tendency to entropy. Liz felt him to be overdosing on logic! She posed some questions about sin (or Sin), and why progressive Christians seem to avoid discussing it.

Sylvia had been inspired by the book *Heaven* by Paula Gooder. She quoted Gooder's introduction: "Heaven is one of those great mysteries that somehow symbolize what we don't know about ourselves and the world around us. At the same time, it lifts our vision from the mundane realities of our everyday lives and reminds us that beyond the daily grind of our existence there is another, unseen reality. A reality that is as real -- if not more so -- as our everyday lives. Heaven suggests an answer to the familiar human feeling that there must be more than this, and prompts us to wonder whether there is indeed more in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in all our philosophies. So, welcome to Heaven, which in case you were wondering is not primarily about the afterlife. Heaven is now!"

On 1st April the group will discuss Saving Jesus (Redux) no 7: 'Jesus' Programme: The Kingdom of God'.

On Sunday May 13th at 2.30 also in URC hall, we have another in our series *Pearls of Great Price*, where we ask people of different faiths and beliefs to share some of those pearls with us: this time Jude Taylorson, who follows Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. Jude is a member of the Exeter faiths and beliefs forum.

Recently some of the group have enjoyed seeing the film *The Way*, (120 min) directed by Emilio Estevez and featuring his father Martin Sheen. It is a moving story of a father whose son has died at the start of a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella and the father's journey, both inward and outward, as he continues it himself, accompanied by a strange assortment of people. It has not been shown in cinemas, but is available on DVD. Other groups might find this a discussion starter.

All meetings listed are on Sundays from 2.30-4.30 at Southernhay United Reformed Church hall, Exeter, EX1 1QA and all are welcome.

Hampshire Hub

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

John Dominic Crossan's 'The Greatest Prayer' is the choice of the A27 Book Club for the 2011/12 season. Meetings are held on the fourth Tuesday morning of each month at various locations close to the A27 between Romsey and Fareham.

PCN's 8 points and David Boulton's booklet 'A Reasonable Faith' provided the basis of a discussion on catechisms at February meeting of the Alton Group. In March the topic is the talks to be given that month by Brian Mountford and Tony Windross at the day conference in London of Sea of Faith in the Churches. Meetings are held on the third Tuesday morning of each month at various locations in the Alton and Petersfield areas.

Celia Storey of the Alton Group is in the Chair for a series of three talks in Lent by James Ashby on the Gospel of Thomas. This event is organised by CANA and held in the Friends' Meeting House in Winchester. Members of the Chandler's Ford/ Winchester group will be joining them.

Karen Armstrong's 'What is Religion?' is the topic for the Southsea Group on the fourth Thursday afternoons of February and March.

Hertfordshire (Permission to Speak)

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

Currently we are working our way through the 5 part DVD / discussion series 'Countering Pharaoh's Production-Consumption Society Today' featuring Walter Brueggemann. Forthcoming meetings take place on Sunday March 18th, May 20th and June 17th at The Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City, AL8 6SZ. The meetings begin at 4 p.m. and conclude with refreshments at 5 p.m. Further details are available from Diana.

Hickling, Norfolk Broads

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

Our group is listening to the CDs of Jack Spong's Edinburgh visit and are finding much that is now familiar and encouraging, with some nuggets of new thinking which sets off our discussions once more. Three members made it to Leeds for the John Dominic Crossan weekend. Once again there was much to learn and be inspired by. The hospitality shown to us by a local family was above and beyond anything we could have hoped for. It made a special weekend - wonderful. It is so good to know that we are not 'alone' in our thinking and believing. As many of us who can, meet with a Norwich group for monthly discussions. The mix of beliefs, stages on the journey and ideas are stimulating - but best is knowing we are safe to express any opinion, hope or fear we feel the need to.

The topic that we frequently return to is one which obviously exercises many other members. How to successfully stay as a member of an established Church and still feel fulfilled and included.

We have worked hard over the last few weeks to, not just talk about our faith, but to put it into action and have organised collections for the local Foodbank which is providing a much needed service in the present hard times.

Our weekly meetings have been disrupted for various reasons over the last couple of months but the knowledge of each other's love and support through dark days and good times are beyond price.

Highlands of Scotland

(Jane Wallman-Girdlestone 01463 230708
jane.wallman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The inaugural meeting of PCN Highlands will take place at The Sanctuary at St Columba House, Alturlie Point, Inverness IV2 7HZ on Saturday, 24th April at 3pm. Members and anyone with an interest in PCN's aims are most welcome. We will be setting our diary

for the year and talking through what we would like from the group as well as an introduction into the art of theological reflection - or trying to understand the difficult and intransigent! Please phone Jane Wallman-Girdlestone to indicate that you are hoping to come so she has an idea of how big a cake to bake! 07776 181824.

Ipswich

(Liz Smith 01473 462875
liz.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Ipswich group started in October 2011 and meets at the Robert Ransome pub, Tower St, Ipswich at 7.30pm once a month.

We met on a Monday to start with, but this has now been changed to a Wednesday. We are studying 'Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time', by Marcus Borg.

We are small in number, but hope to gain more members soon.

Leeds (Yorkshire)

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

Saturday morning meetings at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church Centre (LS7 4NB) Saturdays 10th March, 21st April, 12th May, 9th June. Coffee/tea from 10.00, gathering proper between 10.30 and 12.

Subjects: 10th March - 'The Jesus Seminar', a body of distinguished theologians in pursuit of the historical Jesus, trying to get underneath the accretions that the Church down the ages has heaped upon him; 21st April - By request, a continuation of the January discussion of a list (drawn up by an Australian PCN group) of characteristics of progressive Christianity; 12th May - 'Borrowing from the Future': Where does Ann Morisy's book take us? 9th June - 'Bring and share' session: Bible stories that have inspired, moved, or are meaningful for us.

Monday evening meetings, *Questers*, 7.30 - 9.30 at the home of a member in Roundhay, Leeds (further details on request). between now and the summer we will be working our way through *Walk the Jesus Walk* by John Simmonds.

Regulars, occasional visitors and newcomers always welcome at any gathering.

Please contact me for further information or directions. It may be possible to arrange a lift.

Manchester

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

Our meetings resumed in January after the Christmas break with an evening devoted to hymns and worship songs. People were asked to choose two items, one of which they found to be inspiring and helpful and the other the opposite, and to describe the reasons for their choices. We were also able to join in singing some of the hymns, all of which contributed to a quite successful meeting. It was interesting to note that many of the "unhelpful" songs revolved around the doctrine of substitutionary atonement - "washed in the blood".

For our meeting in February, we were hoping to listen to a recording of Dom Crossan's lecture "The

execution of Jesus in Mark" - taken from the conference in Leeds in September 2011.

In March we shall be very pleased to welcome Andrew Pratt to speak on the topic "Singing (and praying) what we believe." Andrew has written many hymns and has 9 of them included in the new Methodist hymn book "Singing the Faith" so we are delighted to have him address our group. The date for this is Wednesday 28th March at 7.30 pm.

The topics for subsequent months have not yet been finalised but we have several interesting ideas and the programme will appear on the website once details are available. However the dates for the meetings will be: April 25th, May 23rd, and June 27th. There is normally then a break for the summer.

Newbury

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



We are a small group of 8 people. We come from all denominations - Anglicans, Quakers, Roman Catholic, Baptist and none! We meet on the last Friday in the month in different member's houses. At present we are tackling 'Living the Questions 2' and at our next meeting will listen to and discuss the session called: 'Kingdom Without Walls'. Recently we had two enquiries from interested people, one is joining us for our next session. We welcome new members, do get in touch.

North Worcestershire

(Tessa Carrick 01527 873135
tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We welcome everyone to our meetings which are bimonthly. We are a friendly group, coming from a variety of backgrounds. Everyone feels comfortable to discuss freely. We meet in people's homes, in the afternoons during winter months but in the evenings in summer. About twelve people come each time. The group has discussed a range of topics and looked at some interesting books but most recently we have based our meetings on the seven sessions of the first Living the Questions DVD. We are at present considering what to think about this coming summer.

Our next meeting is Tuesday 13th March at 2.30 p.m. in Hagley, near Stourbridge. We will be looking at the final Living the Questions topic: Out into the World. Please phone or email Tessa for details of the venue and for a copy of the preparatory notes. We'd be delighted to see anyone interested who lives in the area - for the next meeting or any future meeting.

Rugby (Coventry and Warwickshire)

(Nicola Phelan 01788 562562)

nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We continue to meet on the second Thursday evening each month unless this clashes with any important dates in the church year. Our meetings are a space where people seem to welcome being able to openly explore aspects of faith in relation to their spiritual journey. Amongst our membership are those who would call themselves Christian and some who would not. We try now to avoid labelling ourselves too much. Church affiliation varies and people have a range of links for spiritual support. In keeping with the current discussions in the PCN newsletter about whether church membership helps us make connections and live out our faith we are exploring from various angles the basics of what living as part of a community means for us today. We are incorporating a look at doctrines and creeds and the challenges and stumbling blocks these throw up for us and others. So far discussions about 'The Charter for Compassion' and some of the beneficial social enterprises organised by local churches has raised many thoughts which may lead to some newsletter articles. A monthly book group meets separately and we continue to discuss Dave Tomlinson's book *Re-*

The or a Son of God?

by Edward Hulme



After pastorates in Baptist churches, Edward Hulme taught Religious Studies until retirement. He has promoted progressive Christianity especially through preaching, lecturing, writing, and

publishing a collection of sermons. He is a member of Bath Central U.R.C.

Was Jesus of Nazareth a 'son of God' or the 'Son of God'?

No one, of course, can provide a definitive answer to a metaphysical question. However firm our convictions, we are bound to be 'agnostic' (in the strict sense of the term) about this core feature of historic Christianity.

From a standpoint of faith, most people who describe themselves as 'Christian' affirm that Jesus was, and indeed is, *the* 'Son of God'. But what sort of answer might a 'progressive Christian' or 'follower of the Jesus Way' or 'Jesus-ite' give?

Their 'faith-answer' will largely depend on how they perceive God.

Enchanting Christianity: faith in an emerging culture which is very relevant to our general group theme.

Meeting dates and themes for the period of this newsletter: Thursday 19th April: What are the rituals of culture as well as the church? What rituals work or might work best in 2012?

Thursday 10th May: What does 'Living in Community' mean for me? What do I think of as 'My Community'? We will draw on the group's different perspectives.

Thursday 14th June: The "Good Life": where does the shoe pinch and where are our agreements and disagreements about it as individuals?

Woking

(John Craig 01483 762059)

john.craig@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Woking Group is continuing, thanks to the helpful PCN lending library, with the Living the Questions 2.0 course. Meeting monthly we are now on the second DVD and this will continue until our July meeting. Numbers are such that there is a Wednesday evening group and a Saturday morning group. What is particularly pleasing is that we started with a core group from one church but this has expanded to include people from several other churches. Anyone interested in our dates and venues should contact John on the phone number above.

If we believe God exists only within the human mind or soul, an 'immanent presence' but not a transcendent being, then Jesus cannot be thought of as *the* Son of God in any 'genetic' sense.

If we believe God is a 'conscious' being, existing outside as well as within the human frame – and possessing 'personal' attributes such as the ability to respond to particular human needs – then the idea of God deciding to restore failing humanity by choosing to become in part human, makes a measure of sense. Given this perception, Jesus could quite reasonably be portrayed as *the* Son of God – even though such a claim raises all sorts of mind-boggling questions concerning the actual process of incarnation.

But suppose we think of God in yet another way – as both 'Cosmic Intelligence' (responsible for the physical coherence and evolutionary potential of the Universe) and internally experienced Spiritual Presence, yet not possessing the 'personal' attributes claimed by traditional theism (such as the power and freedom to intervene in human matters) – what then? This notion of God might weaken the case for Jesus being thought of as *the* Son of God – the result of a deliberate strategy involving divine incarnation – but if he was not *the* Son of God, his unique spiritual insight and achievements still demand an explanation.

Turning to the New Testament

Turning (necessarily briefly) to the New Testament, we find many texts and passages which affirm Jesus's divine sonship, such as in the letters of Paul (with confident fervour in Colossians 1:15-22) or in the sublime poetry of John's prologue, although the Gospel of Mark in particular seems to imply Jesus himself much preferred the epithet 'Son of man'. Indeed, one wonders whether Jesus himself could ever have wished to be labelled 'Son of God', bearing in mind such an idea would be outrageous, even blasphemous, to a committed Jew, which he definitely was.

On the face of it, the heart of the Birth narratives is indeed the birth of the 'divinely begotten' Saviour. But readers who take Biblical scholarship seriously realize that Matthew and Luke were not so much telling factual history as conveying a vital message about the superiority of Jesus over the earthly powers of the time: if each Roman emperor was deemed to be the 'Son of God', whatever the moral quality of his life, how much more should Jesus of Nazareth, with his outstanding spiritual authority and moral character, deserve to be designated 'Son of God!' If, on balance, the New Testament does present Jesus as *the* Son of God, real problems remain for those who cannot take the text at its face value. For one thing, how could a genuine human – one aspect of historic Christianity's understanding of Jesus – be conceived and born 'of a virgin' (or even a 'young woman') without the chromosomes of a human father?

A figurative term?

If Jesus was not 'biologically' God's 'only son', was he analogically so? Paul doesn't refer to the divine conception of Jesus and probably hadn't even heard of the virgin birth notion, so maybe he was actually using the term 'son' figuratively rather than literally.

However, even when the 'son concept' is used as a metaphor to describe Jesus's illumination of what it means to let 'the God within' infuse and inspire one's innermost self, there are difficulties. Thinking of Jesus revealing the nature of God in the way that a human son might expose characteristics of his human father, can so easily lead one to picture God in humanoid terms – which, judging from many historic paintings and certain modern hymns, has too often been the case. In short, the son of God idea may excessively restrict our concept of God.

The challenge of Judaism and Islam

That the other two Abrahamic faiths – Judaism and Islam – dispute Christianity's claim that Jesus

was (and is) *the* Son of God, also raises serious questions about the claim's validity. Could one of three major faiths be so utterly 'right' in affirming that God is actually one being in three persons and the other two be so profoundly 'wrong' in asserting God is actually one indivisible being?

His indisputable specialness

Suppose, then, we portray Jesus as *a* rather than *the* Son of God? Jesus is now counted as fully human, genuinely 'one of us', truly able to appreciate our failings and needs. But we still need to account for his indisputable specialness, for his outstanding if not unique spiritual maturity and moral wisdom, for embodying so much we associate with the God-notion. If Jesus was neither divinely planned nor begotten, how was it that in his short, truncated life he achieved what has indisputably been globally transformative?

The God-presence

This is a question 'progressives' like me mustn't duck! I wish I could find and offer a totally convincing answer. It may be that every human ever born has 'divine' potential (a plausible interpretation of the 'image of God' idea in Genesis 1); that we are all 'sons or daughters of God'; that God is present in each of us, only awaiting our discovery. However, whereas most of us allow this God-presence to influence our lives to some extent, a tiny few do so to a large extent, and Jesus to a unique degree.

"Who do *you* say I am?"

But why did Jesus allow this God-presence to infuse his mind and life so totally? Historic Christianity affirms it was because he literally was 'God incarnate'. Down the centuries, some have argued that God 'adopted' and nurtured the child or Nazareth. Contemporary materialists who put their faith in random chance might say a spiritual genius like Jesus is sooner or later inevitable. Sociologists might surmise there have been other 'Jesuses' but none recognized and promoted (even 'airbrushed' a little?) like Jesus of the New Testament!

Personally denying the central paradox of traditional theology (that Jesus is simultaneously fully human and fully divine), I believe he was exclusively *human* – therefore *a* 'son' (or daughter) of God like the rest of us. But I also believe he so totally responded to the 'God-presence' within his innermost self, that I am content to call him *the* 'son of God' – though with a small 's'!

"What about you?" he asked them, "Who do you say I am?"

The way of Christ – the way of non-violence.

A summary of a talk given recently by Mary Dove at the local Cornflakes Theology group in Driffeld.

I grew up in a church where the way of non-violence had been tried and proved costly but which I took to be the Christian norm - that Jesus meant what he said, 'Love your enemies'. The conscientious objectors I met and those I only heard about as they were killed as they served as stretcher-bearers had to face the accusation of cowardice.

Later I was challenged by those who said non-violence was unrealistic or even immoral in the face of the horrors of evil in the world - the 'what if?' arguments.

With pacifist teachers at school I looked at the problem of the way violence breeds violence and causes us to reflect the same behaviour as the enemy. As we respond violently we become what we oppose and hate. I learnt that pacifism is not 'passivism' but an active and realistic following of the way of Jesus.

I have become increasingly aware of how non-violence is something we have to practise in every aspect of life if we are ever to be effective in violent situations.

Walter Wink's three books, 'Naming the Powers', 'Unmasking the Powers' and 'Engaging the Powers' have inspired me.

Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving your under garment as well as your coat - were about taking control and refusing to be manipulated into a violent confrontation or passive capitulation.

The way of non-violence was not fight or flight but Jesus' third way. Wink suggests these include:-

- Seize moral initiative
- Find a creative alternative to violence
- Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person
- Meet force with ridicule or humour
- Break the cycle of humiliation
- Refuse to submit to or accept the inferior position
- Expose the injustice of the system
- Recognize your own power
- Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate
- Force the oppressor to see you in a new light
- Deprive the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective
- Be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws.

Pacifism is costly and not for cowards. Ghandi reckoned you could not move directly from flight to third way but need to pass through fight stage - not actually being violent but angry enough to be willing to fight and die for a just cause.

Jesus' teaching on non-violence is not legalistic – telling an abused woman she must put up with her husband's violence or telling a child being bullied merely to turn the other cheek – a non-violent solution is best but that needs training and courage and people should not be made to feel guilty because their instinct is to hit back. Rather the spirit of non-violent response to evil is a gift – we need releasing from the power of violence and destruction to creative non-violence.

Too easily we can become what we hate when we are fiercely opposing an injustice.

Most people say they hate war, but consider it to be the only way in some situations. They point to teaching on 'the just war'. The following words from Niall O'Brien explore 'The Myth of Just War'.

'No wonder so many people, gentle and kind people, quiet and unaggressive people, find themselves saying at long last, "There is only one way to deal with ...evil tyrants.. There's only one language these people understand - the gun.

To such people I say, welcome to the largest consensus the world has ever known: a consensus between east and west, between capitalist and communist, between mosque, church and synagogue. All agree there comes a time when it is just to kill each other.

Welcome home to the consensus on which our world is built.

Ultimately we are faced with two choices; to accept the 'myth' of the just war, that as a last resort killing is moral, or to accept the 'myth' of non-violence: we have no last resort - killing is never right. In the first case, sooner or later we will come to the moment when the conditions for using violence are verified, when we reach the last 'resort'. In the second case, believing in our myth that violence is never justified, having no 'last resort', human beings come up with alternatives from the depth of their creativeness. We can and we will learn to live together but only when we have closed off that escape route known as

the last resort.' (Niall O'Brien, "Making the Myth Real")

The new reality Jesus proclaimed was non-violent. Early Christians recognised this and refused to serve in the Roman army - eschewing violence and idolatry. They opposed war; then came Constantine. 'Christianity's weaponless victory over the Roman Empire eventuated in the weaponless victory of the empire over the gospel. No defeat is so well-disguised as victory! In the year 303 Diocletian forbade any member of the Roman Army to be a Christian. By the year 416 no one could be a member of the

God's Terrorist

by Tony Raine



Tony Raine is a retired teacher and educational adviser. For the last thirteen years he has been able to concentrate on writing books mostly on Christianity, sketches for use in church and columns for local newspapers.

Tony was neither royalty nor celebrity, so he did not expect to be kidnapped as he walked home. It was therefore a surprise to him when a heavily built man suddenly pushed him into the doorway of an empty shop. With a loud ping from a mechanical bell, the glass door, wallpapered with advertisements for a long-gone circus, burst open and the two of them stumbled, unobserved by the few people still on the streets, into the rank, semi-darkness of a derelict cobbler's shop.

Tony was angry rather than afraid, and it took him all his will power not to use the language of the street to berate his attacker. "How dare you push me off the pavement like that!" he raged. "Who are you? What do you want? If its money you're after, you're out of luck - I'm not carrying much."

The man was strong, and he forced Tony to the floor where he was obliged to squat. "I need your undivided attention. There's something I have to talk to you about. You're the guy that writes for the newspaper sometimes, right?" the man said in an deep, angry voice.

"Why should I confirm anything for you?" There was much more that he wanted to say but Tony stopped himself, his conscience questioning how a Christian ought to behave, even in such unusual circumstances.

The man continued, "You wrote the article in the Evening Herald last Saturday."

"So?" Tony responded.

"So we don't agree."

"So we disagree. I can live with it."

"You might; I can't," the man snarled.

Roman Army *unless* he was a Christian. The oppressed became oppressors.

Augustine (d.430) drew on Stoic just war principles to articulate a position that was to dominate church thinking from his time until now.

You cannot make peace - real peace, with war. Christians have a vocation for non-violence, grounded in the teaching of Jesus, the nature of God, the ethos of the kingdom and the power of the resurrection.

"You what?" Tony struggled to understand. "That isn't what this is about? You're kidding me, right?" The man continued, "I don't like you spreading stuff like that. Other stupid people might start agreeing with you."

"Who on earth are you, anyway?" Tony demanded.

"Let's say I'm a terrorist for God," the man replied.

"Rubbish!" Tony answered contemptuously.

"Violence is the opposite of what God wants from us."

"There's a time for every purpose," the man quoted. "We can strike down God's enemies - the Bible is full of it. I belong to a radical fundamentalist Bible Christian group that doesn't like the liberal attitudes that you so-called modern Christians seem to have. There are quite a number of intelligent theologians on our side."

"What makes you think you can find faith with intelligence?" Tony responded. "I've known people who can't tell you the number of days in a year but seem to have a better understanding of God than you. You find God through your heart, not your brain - or by kidnapping me."

"That's as may be. The problem is we can't have you running round saying you're a Christian and shouting that there was no immaculate conception. It's a fundamental part of the creed for every Christian: Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the *virgin* Mary." The man emphasised the word *virgin*.

"I prefer Mark's version of the nativity. I like his gospel - it's straight and simple without any other agenda beyond telling it how it was."

The man snapped back in anger: "Mark didn't have a version. He began with John the Baptist about thirty years later."

"Precisely. That's where the story should begin.

The other two stories are just two of the many folk tales that were cleverly written to convey some beautiful truths. Enjoy them - learn from them - but you don't have to believe them."

"Stop calling it 'two' stories," the man protested. "There's only one story that's told in two gospels." Tony looked at his assailant with a degree of pity. "Have you ever actually read them properly? They're totally different. I could rattle off seven fundamental contradictions between them."

The man looked shocked. "Give me one," he challenged.

"Matthew has them run away to Egypt for a few years. Luke has them going to Jerusalem and then to Nazareth after a week. How contradictory do you want?"

The man's face reddened as he struggled to regain his position. "They both have the virgin birth, though. That's what matters."

"They do," Tony conceded. "They also both mention Bethlehem, but that's all the similarities you'll find. They even give Joseph different ancestors," he explained, adding with a hint of mischief, "Perhaps he's a different Joseph."

The man seemed to think this argument actually leant strength to his. "So you have to accept that God was the father of Jesus," he said with a tint of triumph colouring his voice.

"Of course he was! And God is *my* heavenly father, and he's yours, too."

"You know that's not what I mean. Why won't you accept that Mary was a virgin, at least until after Jesus was born?"

Tony ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "Because there's no reason, except a beautiful bit of fiction, to suggest that I should. God had a perfectly good way of making people already. Anyway, fundamentalists like you should recognise that the paternity of Joseph is important to the prophecies - that's if you set any store by those."

"What do you mean, 'if'? Don't you?"

"No, not really. The Old Testament was faulted. Surely we all know that. It's why Jesus had to set it straight. 'They say this... But I tell you that.'"

"You're twisting the truth," the man argued in exasperation. "All his corrections were just tightening the law. He didn't change a word, 'not a jot or a tittle.'"

"Simplifying it, usually. But for me 'Love your enemy' is radically different from 'Exterminate every living thing in Jericho - man, woman, child and animal,' as God is supposed to have said. Can your God be guilty of abetting a war crime?"

"You.. You don't believe God told Joshua to do that?" the man struggled to accept the enormity of the gulf between them. "You don't accept the stories and the laws in Exodus, Leviticus and the other books of the Pentateuch, then?"

"No more than you do," was the blunt reply.

"How dare you presume....!" the man gasped.

"I bet you eat pork and shellfish; you're wearing clothing of mixed fabric; you probably have mixed vegetables in your garden; you don't actually stone blasphemers as you're told you must." Tony paused to let this sink in. "It seems to me that if you can just pick the nice cherries and leave the rest then you lose the authority to say any one of them need be followed."

"You're accusing us of cherry picking! I bet you don't accept Genesis at all!"

"Dead right!" Tony confirmed, "though again, those stories are stuffed with eternal truths, and I love to read them looking for those truths."

"You don't accept the creation stories then?"

"Are you joking? You expect me to believe that day and night were created on the first day but the sun that causes them wasn't made until day four? Get real! You think Cain settled in the land of Nod, whoever he was, married to the sister that he didn't have? There were supposed to be only three people left in the world after he'd killed his brother."

The man seemed to think that he'd heard enough.

"You've proved beyond doubt that you don't believe huge amounts of the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New. You obviously can't accept the Apostle's Creed. How on earth can you call yourself a Christian?"

Tony struggled to his feet as he began to explain. "Because Christians don't worship the Bible; they don't worship the creed that was written by men, not God; they don't worship the cross; and we weren't bought because God required the torture and monumental blood-letting of his own son as a punishment for our sins!"

The self-styled terrorist was beginning to look dangerous. "That's it! I've heard enough of your foul blasphemies!"

But Tony was just getting started. "The Bible is the most valuable book in the world if you know how to read it. It enables us to see Jesus clearly - to know the man. The cross is not a symbol of torture - it's a reminder that God is no longer nailed to it - that it's empty - that he's here in the world with us! Think of that every time you see it, rather than seeing only the pain we caused the man. And he didn't buy us from anybody - he gave his life so that we would know his message of love and be saved by it. *How great a love was that!*"

The terrorist was almost out of control as he raged, "You worship the devil!"

Apparently blind to the effect his words were having, Tony continued. "There is no such being! It's a metaphor for our own selfish sin. We are quite wicked enough without need of one. It's a man-made, man-like image that represents evil, but there is only the one supernatural being, one God, and him I love with all my heart."

The man's eyes seemed to sink into his head before he finally lost it and came at Tony fists flailing. Tony was agile enough to sidestep most of the onslaught until the man paused for breath.

"Stop this!" Tony commanded. "Stop it now! We both worship the same God. All right, at the moment we have a different understanding of him. He wants us to talk about our faith; to share it; to make progress in it. You can't lock it up in a book. Faith has to live and flourish. A living faith adapts – it doesn't follow a book of immutable words – it follows a man who is now one with God and who gave his life to show us how we must live."

The terrorist simply stood, staring at Tony, his face crimson, his clothing dishevelled. Then he spoke,

his words faint and rasping, "How can I let you remain alive while you spread these wicked ideas?"

Tony held out his arms towards the man and responded in a gentle voice. "How can we not love each other as the Lord we both serve told us we must? If I am your enemy – then love me!"

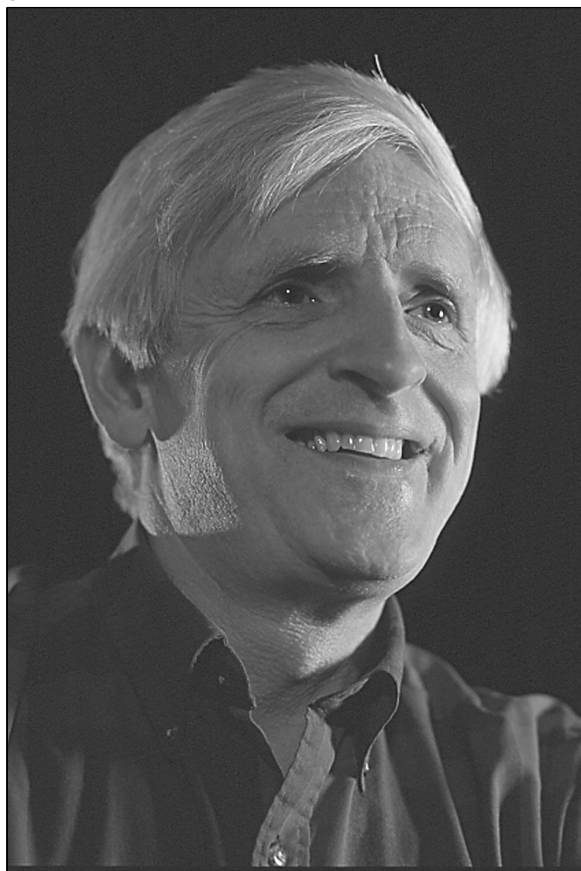
The man seemed torn in anguish before he spoke with a visceral cry that rose from deep inside him, "If I disbelieve the book then I have nothing. The foundations of my life are destroyed!"

Tony spoke with love aching in his heart, "Trust in the man whom you know from all you have read. Hold to him. It is enough."

The two stood, facing each other for a long moment before they both strode forward and embraced.

UK tour by Matthew Fox

Members who are older may well remember the name Matthew Fox, a Roman Catholic priest in the sixties who explored the theme of Creation Spirituality, long before that was on the agenda of Christians generally. Now an Episcopalian, he is touring the UK as guest of the Wrekin Forum for a fortnight at the end of March and early April. Dates, locations, costs where we know details and contact information where we know the details are given below.



Saturday 31st March and Sunday 1st April. A Spirituality for the 21st Century

A two day workshop, 10.00 am - 4.00 pm, Two Day Workshop at Mangreen Trust, Norwich. Contact

Naomi: trust@mangreen.co.uk, 01508 570444, www.mangreen.co.uk

Wednesday 4th April Evening talk in London. The Mystics: Pioneers of Consciousness

Contact: Scientific and Medical Network: info@scimednet.org, 01608 652000

Thursday 5th April 7-9pm Evening talk Birmingham. The Marriage of the Sacred Masculine with the Divine Feminine

www.treeoflifemagazine.co.uk/ £9 £7 concessions

Friday 6th April-Saturday 7th April at St Agnes Church, North Reddish, Manchester

Fri 2 pm: The Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Planet (£15)

Fri 7.30 pm: The Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Cosmic Christ (£15)

Sat 10.00 am - 4.00 pm: Spirituality in the 21st Century (£50)

Suggested contributions indicated in brackets – no one turned away through inability to pay
Contact Clive: ob.lk@tiscali.co.uk, 077899 15263
www.northreddish.org.uk/matthew-fox/

Monday 9th April 7.45 pm Public Lecture at Universal Hall, Findhorn, NE Scotland. Our Emergence into Christ Consciousness: An Imperative for Our Time

Part of the Into Christ Consciousness conference.
Contact: www.thebooth.co.uk or 01309 690110

Wednesday 11th April 7.00-8.30 pm Public Lecture and Book Signing. The Marriage of the Sacred Masculine with the Divine Feminine at Alternatives, St James's Church, Piccadilly, London

Contact: 020 7287 6711, www.alternatives.org.uk.

The event in Reddish on Friday 6th and Saturday 7th April – Good Friday and Easter Eve – is being organised by Clive Larsen at St Agnes Church by Clive Larsen, PCN member and a PCN-friendly Church. He has produced a splendid flier/poster on the weekend. Contact him as given above.

Book reviews – and book matters

The Greatest Prayer by John Dominic Crossan

Rediscovering the revolutionary message of the Lords Prayer

SPCK ISBN: 9780281064175. Pb, 208 pp £10.99 (£7.69 on Amazon)

Reviewed by Betty Saunders

In this Biblical study of the Lord's Prayer Crossan brings together all of the major themes he has explored in his other books (or at least in all of those that I have read).

His controlling image is of God as the Great Householder, the Creator and owner of the earth and all that lives on it and the one who insists on fair shares for all in his household. He builds up this picture by reference to foundational texts in the Jewish Torah and the Old Testament Prophets so that we may be surprised to find ourselves reading unfamiliar passages, for instance in Leviticus, Deuteronomy and the book of Daniel and realising how selective the Common Lectionary is!

Much of the historical background – or as he would prefer to call it the 'matrix' - that he provides in order to interpret the biblical passages are a condensed version of some of the scholarship that underlies his major studies on the life of Jesus and of the early church, "The Historical Jesus, The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant" and "The Birth of Christianity."

He uses his section on 'Thy will be done' to focus on the question of whether God willed the death of Jesus and the related theology of substitutionary atonement. While accepting and explaining the concepts of sacrifice and of atonement he can find no historical justification for the use of the idea of substitution and rejects this theology as the mistaken attempt of Anselm, in the eleventh century to compose a logical theory based on a feudal metaphor for God as an offended Norman Lord. Readers of Crossan's other books will recognise this as an aspect of theology about which he is most passionate, regarding substitutionary atonement as a total distortion of the meaning of Christ's life and death that has unfortunately come to be regarded as orthodoxy.

Related to this argument is his rejection of any interpretation of God's Judgement as the administration of external punishment. Crossan's God is a Father who allows his adult children to suffer the consequences of their actions and this is the internally derived punishment for our sin and most especially for our sin of violence whose consequence is a never-ending cycle of violence.

Didn't see you in church, Jesus, by Jack Dean

Privately published. Booklet. 61pp. Available from the author

With his classic and charming understatement, Jack sent this message to the editor for inclusion in this issue:

He makes us aware of the structure of the Lord's Prayer as a form of poetic parallelism, both verse by verse and in the structure of the whole. 'As in heaven so on earth' thus becomes seen as a refrain throughout the prayer.

Our heavenly Father hallowed be Thy name
Thy kingdom come Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

This first section about God is then balanced by humanity's earthly needs:-

Give us our bread for today and forgive us
our debts (lest we fall into slavery)

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us
from the Evil One

His down-to-earth interpretation of the prayer leads him to emphasise first a literal interpretation of 'debts' rather than 'trespasses' or 'sins' with historical information linking indebtedness to slavery.

The greatest and last Temptation he interprets as the temptation to use violence in resisting the empires of the world, the 'powers and dominions' of world systems and, in Jesus' case the temptation to resist the Roman Empire by violent revolt, the greatest temptation of all being to use violence in the name of God.

Crossan is, of course, using anthropomorphic metaphors for God as they are embedded in the Lord's Prayer but is aware of their limitations. The Biblical commentary on each clause is refreshing and illuminating and brings the prayer to life again after much mindless repetition. The irony of this Biblical emphasis becomes apparent in his last chapter when he firmly shuts the pages of the holy book to give precedence to the non-violent Christ over the mixed message of the Bible in its presentation of a God who both promises peace and yet resorts to violence at the end.

Dom was able to give us only a taste of this book in his sermon at the weekend conference in Leeds last September. It is well worth close consideration section by section and, with its exploration of unfamiliar biblical material makes excellent material for House Group study and discussion.

"Having read 'responses to a paragraph' in the December 2011 issue of the PCN newsletter, I feel compelled, constrained, to overcome my innate

aversion to self-promotion and offer my contribution to Alison Beresford and Merryn Hellier - and to anyone of like mind.

Last year, I published a booklet I dared to call 'Didn't see you in church, Jesus' and I will gladly send a copy to anyone who finds, as I do, some difficulty in connecting the Jesus I think I glimpse hidden within the gospels with the organised church, which I sense is in serious need of a new Reformation.

Religion for Atheists: a non-believer's guide to the uses of religion by Alain de Botton

Hamish Hamilton ISBN: 9780241144770 hb, 320 pp, £18.99 (£11.79 on Amazon). Reviewed by the editor

Alain de Botton is very clever, a good philosopher, a talented essayist - and an extremely gifted self-publicist. In some ways, I suppose, everything that one ought to deplore; the true post-modern persona. And yet I am quite regularly delighted by his books, and his ability to open up new territory for me.

This one is not new territory, but throws interesting light on territory most members of PCN will be familiar with. It is work in progress for me, and I offer just two brief quotations from my Kindle.

"We invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply

Contact me if you are interested -
mdean@bucksghl.org.uk . Jack Dean"

The editor gladly does so. The 10 essays are well-written and powerful. To the editor's eyes they do appear sometimes an overstatement, but the newsletter welcomes all members' ideas, and others will warm to what Jack writes. As well as a writer, Jack is also an artist, and the book cover carries his own drawing of the church at Augignac. It's a place I have visited in the past. And in its calm and stillness, I'm sure I caught a glimpse of Jesus!

rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise."

"Religions merit our attention for their sheer conceptual ambition; for changing the world in a way that few secular institutions ever have. They have managed to combine theories about ethics and metaphysics with a practical involvement in education, fashion, politics, travel, hostelry, initiation ceremonies, publishing, art and architecture – a range of interests which put to shame the scope and the achievements of even the greatest and most influential secular movements and individuals in history."

Held not Handled An ash wednesday meditation by Hugh Dawes

Based upon a homily at the eucharist at St Bartholomew's Haslemere. The sudden death of a much loved member of the family of this church was the background of paragraph four.

For a long time now I've not felt a lot of enthusiasm for giving things up in Lent. Those who know of my pleasure in food and a glass or two of wine will not be surprised by this. But when I was younger I did do it, and could manage it quite well, and felt quite pleased with myself at having managed it. And there's the rub. What's the reason for giving things up for lent? Is it, as the Church of England's lent preface says: "to learn to be God's people once again?" Or are we perhaps more concerned with issues of waistline and fitness which may well be important, but perhaps not intimate to the life of faith.

Maybe we should see lent not as giving up, but as making space. A time to make some space so as to give time to some of those things that we would really like to do, but never quite seem to manage. Space to share with other people. Just once in the parish of which I used to be a member we did give up meetings in lent; and found then we had time to visit the housebound neighbour, make that phone call we had been wanting to make to a friend

bereaved; and also clear some space to be with our partner, children, parents. I'm sad to say we only managed it for one year. But it did affect the way we viewed things after that.

But alongside of giving time to other, giving time to ourselves also. Lent is properly about that as well. In popular imagination, for people unfamiliar with, or disaffected from church and its ways, Lent looks pretty odd. We talk of fasting, self-examination, self-denial – all that kind of stuff. They suggest to the stranger a certain harshness with ourselves, one which by implication flows over to them who are not doing what we do. And there are places where a hair shirt approach to this season still persists.

Yet it's not the only way of interpreting or using Lent. 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.' Those words, as a cross in ash is made on our foreheads in the liturgy, can appear hard, a judgement on and against our frailty and worthlessness. But they can equally be seen, and this is how I would choose to read them, much more as an invitation to be gentle with what is so fragile, yet wholly wonderful: Life. Here just for a season, yet beautiful and good.

'Remember that you are dust.' And so attend to yourself, give yourself time and space. Let the church cherish you, let others love you, and be ready to love yourself. Here is an opportunity to cease striving, even if only for a little while, to perform and to succeed. A time instead to allow yourself to be, and to delight in being.

For the best part of 20 years now I've been haunted by a phrase I once read in a Sunday newspaper at a friend's house, but never found again. It cropped up in a discussion of medical approaches to people in terminal illness. The move towards the recognition that there is actually quite a lot to be said for the idea of a 'living will'. People being allowed to die, if that's their wish, and being spared all the indignity and futility of tubes and treatment. There was a final quotation from someone in the BMA, who said that when her time came she hoped she would be able to die at home, and with her daughter. Because she said, when she was dying, she wanted 'to be held, not handled'.

To be held, not handled. That seems to me an ambition, and an approach, as important to living quite as much as to dying. Such a lot about life's busyness reduces us to being handled. Bad enough when others do this to us. But so often we handle ourselves, pushing ourselves about and causing ourselves to perform in the way in which we imagine the company, the department, the building society or even God requires us to. So life becomes burden rather than joy, accompanied perhaps by a wistful looking forward to a future

time which will be different: tomorrow, the weekend, the summer holiday, retirement. It's hardly surprising that when those arrive, they too are beset with performing, doing what's expected, and still more pushing of ourselves around.

Lent encourages us, if only for a few weeks, to step back from such intensity. It offers us time to read, to pray, to share faith understanding with others (whose own understandings may well be different from our own), and to do that with love and charity. It bids us be gentle to others and to ourselves. To allow ourselves to be held and healed - even with the touch of ashen thumb on forehead.

Writing these words, I was also arranging to see my spiritual director, and fix a time nearer Easter to make my confession. To those unfamiliar with such things, the language of direction or of sacramental confession can easily conjure up images of manipulation, control, self-accusation and unlove, and appear yet another example of women and men being 'handled'. And no doubt sometimes it is. But my own experience is of something very different. In trying to reveal myself, warts and all, to another person, I discover not censure, but acceptance and forgiveness. 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.' And so do not be anxious, but laugh, and be loved, and seek to love yourself (myself) as well. To be held and not handled. That is what Lent can and should be about. May it be so for us in our making ready for Easter's dawn.

This issue of the newsletter looks a little different. The editor has no prior knowledge of what it will look like, but being printed on white paper should mean it is easier to read, and possibly the print looking a bit sharper. Some further changes may well be on their way, including a hint of colour, and a bit of a redesign. Exciting times!

Copy date for the June issue will be Friday 29th June 2012 – the feast of Peter and Paul. Summer might be with us, holidays may be in the offing again. The Olympics will probably be impinging on us more, and goodness knows what state the world will be in. How does all this touch upon the trust of the companions of Jesus? The newsletter welcomes contributions from *all* members of the network, not just the regular usual suspects! *Do please contribute something.* Email please to hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk, or if you don't use email, post to Andy Vivian at the address below. All posted copy must be typed, in a font that is easy to scan.

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The members of the Management Committee are:

Chair:	John Churcher john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk	Adrian Alker adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk	
		Sonya Brown sonya.brown@pcnbritain.org.uk	
Vice Chair	Mary McMahon mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk	Helen Fisher helen.fisher@pcnbritain.org.uk	
		Philip Goodwin philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk	
Secretary:	Paul Onslow paul.onslow@pcnbritain.org.uk	Sandra Griffiths sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk	
		Angela Smith angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk	
Treasurer	Andrew Burrell andrew.burrell@pcnbritain.org.uk	Richard Tetlow richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk	

Administrator and Web Manager: Andy Vivian – andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk