

# The 2017 Marcus Borg Memorial Lectures by Rev'd Dr Robin Meyers at St.Stephen's Church, Bristol on 13<sup>th</sup> May.

## Summary Report by David Ireson

An introduction:

Dr Val Webb, from Australia, offered a preface to the day: Quoting a pastor friend she said PCN is not so much a movement as a momentum. It is like a flooding river slowly spreading across a flood plain. The unstoppable water soaks into every available space, flowing over rocks and obstacles to leave green shoots emerging over previously parched land. The flood is unpredictable, spreading wherever it is possible to go but also likely to cause a lot of damage before everything settles again. This 2017 Marcus Borg memorial lecture continued the PCN tradition. Robin spoke critically of the political and theological challenges which face the churches in the USA. There was not much reference to life in Britain, but so much of what is happening in America must have left the hundred or so PCN members at this Bristol conference realizing that his words are troublingly relevant.

Robin Meyers is a United Church of Christ pastor, working in Oklahoma City and professor of theology in the city university. He is a member of 'The God Seminar' (formerly 'The Jesus Seminar') working closely with John Dominic Crossan and now taking a key role in the Marcus Borg Foundation. Robin began his first talk with a very warm appreciation of the friendship and integrity he knew in Marcus Borg.

The day was chaired by Rev'd Tony Rutherford.

## Lecture One: "How I became a heretic... with help from Jesus."

Robin is an unrepentant heretic. He said using the word 'heretic' in the title of his first lecture is likely to make many people feel a little nervous. Borg had said that the word 'heretic' refers to someone who chooses, in matters of faith and doctrine, to move beyond the norms of orthodoxy.

Church and state seem to co-exist in harmony. Few heretical voices are raised in criticism. Robin is critical however: "America and the UK are in trouble" he says, with nationalism and even fascism on the rise. History does indeed repeat itself, but ministers preach little about what is going on in the world. The prophetic voice is rarely heard. On the day when a broadsheet newspaper declared that the level of global warming had reached a critical point most of the media did not even bother to mention it. Newspapers, and the media generally, are becoming more focused on entertainment than upon the news. They report events in the lives of celebrities or in sport, "our Neo-Roman diversion". Robin sees 'fascism' *not* as the rise of 'jackbooted thugs' but fundamentally as growing control of the government by (often corporate) special interests "with the blessing of the Church". He says "the opiate of the masses now is disinformation disguised as entertainment and confused with news." We live in an age of 'post truth' and false 'alternative

facts'. So, for example, the *fact* that the chasm between rich and poor is greater now than it has ever been is obscured and the Church rarely raises the matter. It certainly focuses more on sexual questions especially on abortion and gay marriage. Robin expresses dismay that the Bush/Blair war on Iraq was not strongly challenged from the pulpit, nor was there much opposition to the imprisonment of many in Guantanamo Bay. "When was the last time the Church was a thorn in the flesh of the Empire?" he asks. "The answer is, we are now part of the Empire." We live in a violent world: "Our games are violent, our movies are violent, our political process is violent and our homes are violent, especially for women."

Robin is concerned about dissonance. What ministers in training learn and think is often strongly at variance with what most in their congregations believe or think. PCN is generally classified as a *liberal* voice from the churches. The word 'liberal', (Dictionary definition: 'open-minded, tolerant of divergent opinions, and generous') "has become a religious and political obscenity" in the USA. (We could ask ourselves if this "L" word is being rubbished in Britain too). Banners and bumper stickers across the US South, proclaim allegiance to 'Jesus'... but this is not understood as a *liberal* Jesus. If Jesus returned now, in Oklahoma they'd have him arrested. Oklahoma has more churches than other states but also has among the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, divorce, poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence.

We are living through a new Reformation. Marcus Borg always said we have to change constantly. We must evaluate what Christians are **doing**, rather than what they say they **believe**. The Sermon on the Mount says everything about what we are to **do**, but not a single word about what we are to **believe**. In 325 CE the Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea turned the Church upside down when his fractious bishops were persuaded that insisting 'right belief' was more important than what we do. Robin calls this "The Great Reversal" and calls on us to reverse the Reversal. We have to go back to the future.

In the first century after the Resurrection Jesus was increasingly referred to as supernatural. Consider when Jesus was understood to be the 'Son of God': In Paul it was at the moment of Resurrection. For Mark in the first Gospel, it was at his baptism in the River Jordan, in Matthew and Luke it was the moment of conception. Finally John writes that Jesus had always been the Son of God before the Incarnation. If we are to imitate Jesus then we need to re-balance the human Jesus with the divine Christ. "The Church has work to do" Robin says, "We may need to demote Jesus". Rudolf Bultman put it this way: "Jesus came preaching God, and the Church came preaching Jesus."

Progressives and Liberals "have their own set of hyper-intellectual problems". It is an illusion that religion is mostly in the head, something to simply discuss and think about. Again, it is a matter of doing, caring and loving. Many liberals can be very judgemental, very prepared to preach the Gospel but not so ready to live it. We need to distinguish between the irrational which we know is not true and the trans-rational - believing in more than can be known. An intelligent faith is required if we are to help many return to faith.

We all need community and we all need sacred space. "The beloved community requires bodies in the presence of other bodies in order to be the body of Christ." Marcus Borg put it this way "Our

preaching must be: (1) Biblically responsible, (2) Intellectually honest. (3) Emotionally satisfying (4) Socially significant.”

Robin drew to a close with many thought provoking words saying we cannot be too honest or too compassionate, and he made a plea for all Christian churches to have an open Eucharistic table. He ended with words from Joni Mitchell’s song Big Yellow Taxi which touched on many of the issues, such as sustainability, which are facing us all in the USA and Britain:

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot  
With a pink hotel, a boutique and a swinging hot spot  
Don't it always seem to go; That you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone  
They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

They took all the trees and put them in a tree museum  
And they charged all the people a dollar and a half to see 'em  
Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone  
They paved paradise and they put up a parking lot.

Hey farmer farmer put away that D.D.T. now give me spots on my apples  
But leave me the birds and the bees; Please!  
Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone  
They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

“That is what we have done in the Church”, he said, “We’ve paved paradise and put up a parking lot”.

He called on the church to go underground. “Jesus was a subversive for the cause of love”. To the words “Love one another” conference members ended the lecture with the refrain: “Every single other...”

## **Lecture 2: Quantum physics and the future of God. Faith in a scientific age**

The second lecture was more fascinating and just as challenging. Marcus Borg had helped many in offering some understanding of just what we mean in using the word ‘God’. As a theology professor, Robin finds students coming in from the country to university often finding the “The Bible as Literature” course to be ‘dangerous’. Their beliefs and truths held from childhood are inspected from an academic perspective for the first time. “The ‘sky God’ of childhood, the supernatural Daddy, the law giver and judge who is alternatively a cosmic comforter and a divine assassin, the God who is on our side and can be enlisted in every battle conveniently loving all the people we love and hating all the people we hate: “THIS GOD IS DEAD”. It is no wonder that millions walk away from the church. They want to know the truth. Organized religion today has a bad reputation with the young who readily turn to mega best-selling atheist texts. There is a God crisis.

We need to gently dismiss the idea of God as ‘the man upstairs’. We need to reject the idea that science and religion are natural enemies; they are natural partners. Our understanding of ‘reality’ is undergoing radical change with the advent of Quantum Physics. Conventional theology is tired and weary. We now turn to science for awe and wonder. Robin said: “Quantum physics is the best spiritual thing that ever happened to me.”

The simple mind stereotypes two kinds of people: Religious people who hate science and critical thinking as the enemy of faith, and some smart scientists who really hate people whose religion makes them appear shallow simple minded fanatics. To Richard Dawkins, he says, “I don’t believe in that God either”.

“The Bible is a conversation about God”. We are in the position of overhearing conversations that were not intended for us. Reading the New Testament epistles is to read other people’s letters. The Bible does not *say* anything. It *said* many things over two thousand years ago *which, none the less, can be made relevant to us in our time*. Theologians would do well to read and appreciate all that poetry can say so powerfully.

Nicolas Copernicus, observing and measuring with great care, discovered that the earth orbits the sun. The sun does not orbit the earth. An enraged John Calvin said “Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?” Martin Luther simply called Copernicus a fool. Galileo endorsed the new cosmology saying “The Bible tells us how to go to Heaven, not how the heavens go.” It nearly cost him his life. When Isaac Newton studied the movement of the stars and of all things that move he worked out laws of motion and which power an almost clockwork model of the universe. At the end of his book Principia Mathematica in 1687, he was smart enough to add a line to get himself off the heretical hook: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.” For the giant ‘clock’ there must have been a clock maker. Society began to study everything as autonomous within a framework created by God but now able to keep going without divine intervention. A machine was regarded as just a collection of parts that all work together. It can be repaired and kept going through human ingenuity. Our God view began to resemble our world view. We had simple and appealing formulae to explain sin, forgiveness, the principles of God’s justice and judgement leading to rewards or punishments. We had set about earning our way to heaven and ensuring we did not end up in hell.

Newton’s is an atomistic view of life. From the single atom to a complex machine all depends on the sum of its parts. If there are problems in society you repair the individual part – send a person to hospital or prison – rather than look at their family or their society. Think of how this model impacts on the way people pray: We ask for forgiveness, ask for help and we petition God. As a small part of the universe we turn to the Supreme Being, God, in prayer.

God is better spoken of as ‘the luminous web’ *in which the whole is far more than the sum of the parts*. (See the book “The Luminous Web” by Barbara Brown Taylor published March 2017). There is no such thing as an individual. Every interaction between people and people, people and things, and things and things, changes the face of history. The **whole** is the fundamental unit of reality.

Marcus Borg called it the 'something more'. The glory of God is there in the whole of creation – “a luminosity pervading all that is”.

Robin does not believe in the Trinity saying “It is a signpost which the Church in its evolution put forth to try to explain the mystery of God the Creator, God a Sustainer... One who helps us through the mystery of the death and Resurrection of Jesus... the Trinity is a very useful relational metaphor... The problem is having to believe in the Trinity... for Jews and Muslims the concept of Trinity is usually understood as polytheism... we have even gone to war over words in the Trinity... I believe the Trinity was helpful and is helpful for some people as a relational metaphor but not as a metaphysic”... In a similar way of thinking he says: “I don't think of the devil as a personal being... but as the symbol of the cumulative effect of hatred, bigotry, anger and insult towards other humans...”

Meanwhile the Church has kept to the Newtonian model. The parish is a machine which the priest is supposed to keep running smoothly whilst individuals are constantly breaking down and seeking repair. We live in a non-Newtonian world. We are going through yet another reformation, after constant cycles of reformation. “We are a personal universe of complexity”. Life is not straightforward and linear. Our plans for the future are usually chaotic or seem so. In fact we are connected in an ordered way to the luminous web “where everything really is connected to everything else. Where every action is consequential and where moral actions matter at a deeply spiritual level.” This leads to a theology of consequence, not a theology of obedience.

Albert Einstein did not like Quantum Theory at all. His Theory of Relativity says that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. But he proved himself wrong. There is an instant communication between particles no matter how far apart they are in the Universe. Einstein called it ‘spooky action at a distance’. “There is indeed some kind of instant super-luminal communication between quantum particles. Once they have interacted with one another they have the power to influence each other no matter how far apart they go.” Scientists call it Quantum Entanglement.

An explanation of Quantum Entanglement might lie in the existence of some kind of field, in the sense that gravity and electromagnetism are fields. The question is: Is there a power field which links all the other fields together and can interact across the Universe faster than the speed of light? “What if everything we do changes something in this field, which changes something else and so on until everything has changed? What if there is no separation; only the illusion of separation.” In terms of quantum physics, our existence could even go on beyond death. This is way beyond our life experience or our capacity to understand. We have to rely upon scientists who explore it all with awe and wonder. But for those following a mystical spirituality, Robin suggests that Love may be the spiritual equivalent of Quantum Entanglement.

Science and Religion are converging in many ways especially in the concept of ‘oneness’. We cannot continue with the idea that the human animal is above all other life forms on earth. All life is connected. **“The illusion of separation is the enemy of the future”** We cannot set ourselves apart. The thinking is that the universe is a Luminous Web and we are stardust in a cosmic field. We are not alone. We are part of the whole web which is pure relationship and the energy which is available to us has been around since the universe was born. We should ‘pray in all directions at

once' trusting that God connects everything. Robin sees a continuity between this idea and the radical theology of Paul Tillich who described God as 'the ground of being' or later as 'being itself'. And of Moses who knew God as "I am Who I am". St Paul wrote that we look through a glass darkly: When the fog finally clears we will see that there is only ONE...

Surely the time is approaching for Science and Religion to hold a Peace Summit. We stare at the mystery of life together. We don't understand it but we all find it amazing.

In questions afterwards, Robin explained his thinking about prayer: "At Mayflower (his church in Oklahoma) we've just simply stopped referring to God in personal terms when possible. If we are writing the liturgy and it's a prayer of confession, my prayers of confession begin 'dear Eternal Spirit', 'dear Luminous Web', 'dear Wholly One'. We try to use terms that are not personal and are certainly not masculine, and we do not use masculine pronouns for God and that is very easy to do... we just say God again... So in our prayers... rather than making them as petitionary prayers... we try to think of prayer as a spiritual practice that helps us access the mystery of this Luminous Web." As a 'Luminous Web theologian' Robin said that whatever we do for others, no matter how small and insignificant, it changes something... However, he says: "The luminous web presumes nothing about good or bad only that everything is connected"... Example: A physical event such as an earthquake has no moral dimension... if someone dies in an earthquake it is not because they did anything wrong... but helping earthquake victims is a moral act and is connected across the luminous web... "I don't think God does anything... that sounds very strange to hear... I don't think God initiates action, I think God is the spiritual reality that connects all things for good or for evil at a spiritual and physical level, but I don't think God makes things happen by saying or thinking or deciding 'I'm going to do this'... I think most of the trouble that people have with God has to do with claims made about what God is up to in the world, which is sometimes highly partisan or absolutely horrible in its arbitrariness... that is what I think is driving people out of the Church... I would like us to have a more healthy view that all consequences are the result of other forces, not all of which we have control over, but a lot of which we have control over. We must stop acting like infants in church wanting some supreme Santa Claus in the sky to do things for us or to punish the people we don't like or to explain the inexplicable..."

Robin is not a theist but the abstract Luminous Web theory leads him to admit that "When people are in deep crisis they do not want to pray to... some kind of nebulous 'May The Force Be With You' invisible web. We pray to something that is enough like us to think we can be in relationship with it and it can be in relationship with us. ***"This is the question I am struggling with"***. How does one become a non-Theist without stripping the comfort people experience in a moment of crisis when they are praying for help and guidance.... How can people be in relationship with something not personal?"

A challenging day!

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Thanks to Chris Avis for recording the whole day and providing the DVDs from which this account and the quotations have been extracted.

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Barbara Brown Taylor "The Luminous Web" published March 2017  
Marcus Borg "Days of Awe and Wonder" published July 2017

Relevant and intelligent YouTube Talks:

Robin Meyers: especially: What is Progressive Christianity all about? *And many others.*  
Look up: Quantum Physics and Quantum Entanglement: Talks from a few minutes to over an hour.