

# Progressive Voices



led by the Spirit in the  
wilderness ...

Luke 4:1



March 2019

# Temptation

Jesus, fellow traveller, hold my hand in your firm grasp  
as we tramp upwards into the land of rocks and loneliness,  
aside from the calls and duties of the world.

Pause for me to catch my breath as I try to keep up.

Walk slowly into the place of the unknown,  
the place of temptation.

Be with me through the lonely days of wandering and wondering.

Be with me as the clamour of the world retreats,  
revealing the still silence.

Sit with me in a hollow, out of the wind,  
the sun warm on our backs.

Loaf-shaped pebbles scattered around.

Is it right to change something permanent and safe,  
a pebble which has seen aeons come and go,  
to a transient loaf,  
eaten today,

more needed for tomorrow?

Am I tempted to discard the reliable  
in favour of the short-term?

Jesus, fellow traveller, help me to know your will.

We stand side by side on the parapet,  
a long drop below us,  
so little between us and the plunge earthwards.

Should I jump,  
leaving the firm grasp of security,  
risking the unknown?

Your hand is in mine

Shall I let go and trust in you when I can no longer be sure,  
fearing the repercussions?

Your temptation to jump.

Mine to stay in the safety of the already known.

Jesus, fellow traveller, help me to know your will.

Give me the courage to follow God's call.

High on the mountain, standing beside you.

Your gaze pierces the distant horizon.

The wind of change wraps its insinuating tentacles around us.

Do we seek fame, recognition, power  
in the busy places of your world  
or stay in the insignificance on the quieter walks of life?

Do we hasten after the values of the world,  
or stay true to the call of God  
in humility and obscurity?

Is it the call of the world, or the call of the Father?

As the wind swirls round the nooks and crannies of my mind,  
send your Spirit to blow away the cobwebs,  
clear the mistiness,

and help me to see the way I should go.

Jesus, fellow traveller, help me to know your will.

Stay with me in the time of temptation.

Deliver me from evil,  
that your will may be done.

Ros Murphy

# Welcome

No sooner is Christmas over than we're moving into Lent, and our PV sprig of greenery in the snow becomes a green Acacia in the Sinai desert. Both Advent and Lent are times of preparation in the Church year, but its only Lent that feels like it. Advent gets lost in the festivities.

Hopefully within these pages you will find much to prepare you. We have a meditation on Jesus' wilderness story, lots of events, encouragement to contribute to our Greenbelt edition and reflect on the 8 points, and find out who looks after the website! We shall reflect on the importance of holding fast to the open way, singing relevant hymns within coherent liturgy, upon Jesus, miracles and communion. Meet a trustee, poet Stevie Smith, and a recipe for conversation. All along with the usual mix of news, reports, poems and reviews.

Welcome to the 28<sup>th</sup> edition of Progressive Voices.

Enjoy!

*Dave Coaker*

**Greenbelt, 23-26 Aug 2019**

**Boughton House, Northants, NN14 3AG**

Our Sept PV will be a Greenbelt special edition. We will produce additional copies of PV to give away.

To make this as effective as possible we invite you to contribute short (1-300 word) stories about your progressive journey.

Greenbelt is a Christian festival of arts, faith and justice and we have a presence there offering a progressive voice into the mix.

[www.greenbelt.org.uk](http://www.greenbelt.org.uk)

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Further information, including details of publications and conferences, is available at

[www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk)

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

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Sept: Friday 12th July 2019

Dec: Friday 1st Nov 2019

March: Friday 24th Jan 2020



# Chair's Letter

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As we travel through 2019 there are two important PCN gatherings in the first part of the year, which, I hope, many members will wish to attend. On Sat 6 Apr we come together for our Annual General Meeting, that yearly opportunity to take stock of our work and our finances, to elect some trustees and to listen to a guest speaker. This year that guest is Professor Richard Wilkinson, who, with his partner Professor Kate Pickett, jointly authored 'The Spirit Level'. More recently they have written a book entitled 'The Inner Level', which explains how inequality affects us individually, how it alters how we think, feel and behave. The subtitle of the book reads: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everybody's Wellbeing.

It is therefore appropriate that once more we are holding our AGM in a place of healing, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. Details of the meeting are on the enclosed flier and we would appreciate your booking a place through the website. I do hope that many members will feel able to come along and enjoy this annual occasion as well as being challenged and stimulated by Richard Wilkinson's address. Thanks will be given to any retiring trustees and I hope new trustees may be elected from the membership.

On Sat 8th Jun in the French Protestant Church of London, on Soho Square, we are holding a major conference, entitled 'Religion and Atheism - Beyond the Divide', with a distinguished line up of speakers. Already people are booking places for the day which should be a truly worthwhile occasion to hear Christians and philosophers in dialogue. Full details are again on the website.

Later in this year PCN Britain hopes once more to be present at Greenbelt. We hope to have a special 'Greenbelt issue' of Progressive Voices to give away and also to use the occasion to tell people of our new short films. However, we can only be present at Greenbelt if enough PCN members and friends are willing to share in the staffing of our stall over the August Bank Holiday. And so I really would like to hear from you if you can lend a hand, if only you can be at the festival for a day. The opportunity to tell some of the 20,000 people about PCN is too important to let slip!

I know that members of PCN and readers of PV appreciate the many book reviews which are a regular feature of our magazine. In 2016 a second book by Mark Oakley, 'The Splash of Words' was published. Mark, a good friend of PCN and formerly on the staff of St Paul's Cathedral in London, is now Dean and Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge. The subtitle of the book is 'Believing in Poetry' and through 29 different poems, Mark takes us on a spiritual and theological tour de force. He describes the poems of R.S. Thomas as a life vest and in the chapter where Mark reflects upon a Thomas poem, he is led to reflect thus upon the Church:

"It is a challenge to keep the rumour of God alive in way that is magnetic to mystery rather than dismissive; there is also clearly a lot of bad religion around, which makes you totally understand what all the sceptics and atheists are all on about..... its as if we as a church are living down to people's expectations sometimes, remarkably adept at discrediting ourselves by finding small opportunities to be mean when there are large opportunities to be generous".

A sentiment, I am sure, shared by many of us! Can PCN in its work help the Church to be generous in keeping the rumour of God alive?

**Adrian Alker** serves as the  
Chair of PCN Britain

[adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk)



## Alastair McIntosh

**Towards Third Millennium Christianity:  
Activism, Nonviolence and the Mystical  
Imperative**

Rawtenstall Unitarian Church, BB4 7QY

**Cost: Donations**

**Saturday 23 March 2019, 11am**

## Barbara Brown Taylor

**24-27 May 2019**

Truro Cathedral, and elsewhere

**Cost: TBC**

More details to follow.

[richard.gray@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:richard.gray@pcnbritain.org.uk)

# Website

We are fortunate to have three members who are voluntarily 'managing' the website, inheriting the task established for us by Andy Vivian:

**Peter Bellenes** is the main point of contact, particularly news items, articles and blogs:

[peter.bellenes@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:peter.bellenes@pcnbritain.org.uk)



He has recently retired from stipendiary ministry in the CofE in the Diocese of Truro. He writes: "My life journey through a variety of Christian institutions has taught me that no one section of the faith community has the monopoly on questioning. Many have within them those who have set out to "live the questions". The spark of questioning, my 'pequena chispa', came to birth in Salamanca where I went as a student in the late 60's. That spark was fanned into flames by my professors in Salamanca, by my lecturers at Lincoln Theological College, by encounters with Quakers and more latterly by a sabbatical with Benedictine nuns in the USA. As editor for news and events I endeavour to reflect the wrestling with ideas, as well as the challenging of institutional structures. I trust and hope that the site can encourage fellow travellers in their pilgrimage through the questions of life."

**Adrian Lambourne** is the contact for group news and info:

[adrian.lambourne@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:adrian.lambourne@pcnbritain.org.uk)



He is convenor of the Balham, south London PCN group, which has been meeting since 2013. He writes: "With the website often being the first point of call for people searching for a group or church, I would like to make access to both groups and churches simpler. I would also like to help them to update their areas and advise when out-of-date information is still on site. If of use, I would also be happy to manage a group leaders' discussion group where we could exchange ideas and information, such as which books or topics or even speakers have proved successful in group meetings."

**Tim Yeager** is the contact for worship resources:

[tim.yeager@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:tim.yeager@pcnbritain.org.uk)



He is an Anglican priest from the USA and is currently Team Vicar at St George's Church, Westcombe Park in the London Borough of Greenwich and the Diocese of Southwark. Tim is keen to explore liturgical resources to help churches offer more progressive ways of incorporating hymns and prayers into services. He has agreed to help develop the Resources pages, and would be happy to receive links and contributions to make available to the Network.

**Peter, Adrian and Tim hope all members who are able, will regularly visit the website and offer any articles and items of news. And we would love some female editors to join the team!!**

# Compassion

The Charter for Compassion is a document that transcends religious, ideological, and national differences. Supported by leading thinkers from many traditions, the Charter calls on us to activate the Golden Rule around the world.



Affirm the Charter for Compassion here:

[charterforcompassion.org/charter/charter-overview](http://charterforcompassion.org/charter/charter-overview)

There is no cost to affirm the Charter. Your signature is a public commitment to the principles expressed in this historic document. But we hope that you will also commit to supporting the work of the Charter for Compassion by contributing according to your ability: become a member of the Charter for Compassion, work as a volunteer, initiate or join a compassionate community initiative, and/or financially support the work of the Charter.

## This child:

*Written for the Baptism of a profoundly deaf child*

This child will turn our world upside down  
As we watch we will be filled with wonder  
As we listen we will hear with new senses  
As we share we will speak in new ways  
As we hold we will be moved to love  
As we love we will be overwhelmed  
As we care we will be anxious with hope

A cry will move us to tears  
A smile will flood us with joy  
A problem will move us to pray  
A solution will lead us to praise.

Life will take on a new meaning;  
New worlds will open to us,  
New dreams will inspire us,  
New life will give new purpose.  
New purpose will drive us on.

Because of this child  
This child will turn our world upside down.

Meryl White

# Your letters ....

## Last Issue - feedback

PV27, Dec 2018 in my opinion is one of the best so far. I take two copies, one of which I place in my church, with a note attached inviting anyone interested to take it, read it and then return for someone else to read.

I thought the article by Jeff Smith – 'The China Effect' was one of the best I have read in PV and I have photocopied it, along with 'After the Fire' by Nick Jones and 'Christians care about Housing' by Jenny Jacobs – I thought both deserved as large an audience as possible; just three articles among many that have much to say to us in today's world. I gave copies to the two ministers from my church as well as putting on the noticeboard. I announced from the lectern that if they read nothing else from PV they should read 'The China Effect' – I await for any feedback!

**George Drake**

## Virtual and physical Church

Dr. Roger L. Ray is the founding pastor of The Emerging Church ([spfccc.org](http://spfccc.org)), and author of 'Progressive Faith and Practice' & 'Progressive Conversations'. His sermons reach an audience of several thousand through podcast (Progressive Faith Sermons on iTunes) and videos (CCCSRINGFIELD on YouTube). He shares that 'When we found that our small congregation in Missouri could not raise the donations needed to maintain our staff and property, we turned to our internet audience for their help. While fewer than one hundred of our estimated audience of 15,000 listeners actually contribute, we have found that with their help we can keep our doors open and the lights on indefinitely.'

**John Churcher**

## Dialogue

I didn't expect 16 people to turn up on a cold Jan night to an Inter faith forum to explore belief and ritual in relation to death and dying but we did. We sat in a circle, many had met before, and there was a sense of openness and eagerness to learn from different traditions. We were introduced to the topic through the Orthodox Christian approach and questions and comments followed as individually we grappled with concepts, but as someone noted there was a sense of respect for difference. There was a request made to learn more

about belief in reincarnation next time. Animated conversations were continuing as the main meeting ended and it felt like dialogue as helpfully defined by Hilary Bond's article in PV27.

**Nicola Phelan**

## Moving forward

Nicola Phelan in her article on Non-conforming Companions (PV27) picks up on my group report in which I mentioned some strong disagreements. We are a mixed group including an atheist, an agnostic and a conservative evangelical. Occasionally we have to remind ourselves that all views can be freely expressed. However, I wonder how many congregations would be able to accept the open questioning and comments we make in our group? Views that we believe to be wrong should be challenged, especially when they hurt people, even if the ones who are hurt are outside the church. In particular, we should oppose the attitude that only those who accept a narrow interpretation of Christianity are acceptable in church.

I feel the need to take our broad approach to faith to a wider audience. But are our meetings too wordy? We do not include food, prayer or singing but focus on talks and discussion and only rarely include visuals.

I see signs of hope, because there are a small number of churches around the country who are openly calling themselves progressive. Yet a movement that incorporates people of all kinds of abilities is needed for a progressive movement to take root. It is a matter of what we do as well as what we think; how inclusive we are with people of all sorts within and outside the church, a willingness to act for social justice and peace and supporting people in their personal and individual difficulties. Progressive Christianity will stick if it is grounded in relationships affirming the spirit of Christ.

**Nigel Jones**

Want to reply? Have your own burning question? A comment on a recent event? Want to check whether a thought is unique to you?

If so, please get in touch  
[dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Perceptions of Christianity

St Thomas the Martyr Church,  
Haymarket, Newcastle

**Tue 12 March, 7pm £5-**

Richard Tetlow will introduce his new book and speak about the perceptions people of different faiths have of Christianity and responses from five Christians.

Pat Fuller, 01670519800

[pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Love is his Meaning Keith Ward

Trinity Church Conduit Road,  
Abingdon, OX14 1DU

**Wed 13 March, 7.30pm £5-**

Cliff Marshall, 01235 530480

[cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## PCN Annual General Meeting

**Sat 6 April, £5**

including a talk by Prof. Richard Wilkinson 'The Inner Level'  
The Queen Elizabeth Hospital,  
Mindelsohn Way,  
Birmingham B15 2TH  
11.00 am – 3.15 pm

## Religion and Atheism - Beyond the Divide?

French Protestant Church,  
Soho Square, London, W1D 3QD

**Sat 8 June, 10.15am-4pm**

PCN £15, Non £20, Students £5

A conversation to engage with our speakers about religion, atheism, seeking ways to dialogue and to search for meaning.

**Julian Baggini** - philosopher,  
author, Guardian columnist

**Richard Holloway** - bishop,  
broadcaster, writer

**Harriet Harris** - Edinburgh  
University head of chaplaincy,  
author, priest.

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# Riding Waves of Hatred

Too often we hear stories of church leaders refusing to marry, bury or christen because granny stopped coming to church. Or someone married a person they loved too much to insist that they buy into the faith of their own upbringing. How many times have you heard someone breathe a sigh of relief once they know that you don't come with a script that insists their joyful or sorrowful occasion be wrapped in religious gloss that is not only meaningless to them, but offends their sense of truth and decency?

Of course we all do those prayerfully crafted services that hold rich meaning for some people and, when we do, we stand with them in a place where their integrity and ours meet lovingly. But none of us would assume that approach fits every situation we are invited into, which is why we have honest conversations that help us to better understand how best to support a couple on their big day or a family grieving the death of a loved one.

Sometimes we are as surprised as they are at what emerges as we agree an approach that takes account of the people concerned, their musical, fashion and spiritual preferences. We may from time to time be warned that such and such a person is very rigid in their beliefs and may not understand – but on the whole, when they see the expression of feeling, the authentic telling of a person's story and the laughter that accompanies the inevitable tears and even anger, they get it too.

But there are always exceptions. When doing a service for a man who died leaving two young children behind, I was approached before the service by a large man who introduced himself as a member of an evangelical church and stated his assumption that I would: "Make sure to tell them about Jesus!" The immediate family had insisted "No religion!" Should I waver from their wishes? No way!

That father had loved Doctor Who and the music of David Bowie. His children and their mother had informed the service content accordingly. When the time came for the committal, the children stepped forward to point sonic screwdrivers at the curtains as I discreetly pressed a button to close them. They walked out with a sense that they'd said goodbye to their father in a way that reflected the many happy times they had enjoyed together. I still see those children, now grown up graduates. They always greet me with enthusiasm and not as a figure only associated with a tragic moment in their lives.

The evangelist was holding back as people emerged. Was he waiting to tell me how offended he was? "You never mentioned Jesus once", he began, "However", he continued, "you did something he would have done and met them where they were and affirmed their

personhood and that of their father". He shook my hand and went to join the rest of the family.

If only it always ended so well. But it doesn't.

Recently I conducted the funeral of a man who was a wonderful character who spoke ripe language, got into all sorts of mischief and whose family had opted for: "no religion – unless it's football!"

As people emerged, they came to tell me how much the man himself would have loved that service or to ask if I'd be available when their time came. One or two older ladies laughingly told me: "It shocked me when you swore, but that was so him. Well done!"

The next day I got a call from a withheld number. A male voice began berating me, saying he was a devout Christian and was disgusted that I'd said no prayers and worse had sworn in church. It was clear as he ranted that there was no point in trying to help him understand that it was actually the neutral chapel of a crematorium, where believers, Atheists and all folk between are welcomed and honoured in accordance with their personal preferences.

"May I know your name?" I asked. "No!" he replied. "Then I'll not try to have a conversation with a coward!" I said, hanging up.

My phone rang again. Number withheld. I ignored it. It rang three times more, intruding on my preparations for a meeting that would set things in motion that would help reduce homelessness in the region in the run up to a cold winter. There was a voicemail from the same man: "You are not fit to call yourself a man of God! You are going to hell. I'll personally make sure you perish for this ..."

That, my friends, is why we really must rise above the waves of hatred. There are many damaged people like this man who have so bought into conditioning that they can't see that it's not about them. It's not even about us as inclusive ministers. Regardless of the threats and the venom heaped upon us, we must help the human family break through to a place where guilt and blame fall away and every soul can be honoured with an authentic sharing of their journey to the alter, through the world or out of the wrestling match with the angel of their ego.

We are called to be honest to self; honest to others and honest to God. We must persevere because everyone deserves the truth that sets them free rather than the falsehood of a single, carefully crafted narrative, beautiful as it may well be, for other people in other circumstances.

**David Gray** is an Interfaith Franciscan, and servant leader for the Progressive Christian Alliance in Britain.



# Quantum Theology & hymnody

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As I have journeyed in my understanding of God, and explored the theology of quantum science, it has pushed me further away from traditional hymns. They feel loaded with doctrine that sits uncomfortably with my understanding of God. I know I am not alone in this. Every week as I prepare worship I wrestle with the choice of hymns. Attempting to strike a balance with where the congregation are in their faith journeys and finding something that reflects the journey offered in worship and which allows the congregation to explore new ideas. It is often said that a congregation's theology is formed by the hymns they sing, and with fewer organists and aging congregations there is a temptation to keep with the familiar. I worry that this leaves me choosing hymns I cannot sing with any integrity and, if we should have a visitor, affirms the view that the church is stuck in the past.

Thankfully there are hymn writers out there who produce hymns which offer an alternative, Ruth Duck and Marty Haughan to name two. However, increasingly I find myself creating a hymn to fit the journey. An example of a recent creation is 'You are here, O God, you are here'. This arose after a reflection on the song 'Kum Ba Ya', (Come by here). Here is a very familiar song, often used in all age worship, which in its theology suggests we need to invite God to be present. Now, I, like many, believe in God who is everywhere. Quantum theology supports this, and expresses that if God is everywhere then God is a part of everything, in everything and therefore everything is in God. Writing a simple song, to the familiar tune, offers an opportunity for everyone at any age or stage to explore this idea.

Some years ago, I wrote a hymn exploring the love of God and Jesus' command to love one another. This was before I began to study quantum theology specifically, but it is interesting to see how my journey had already taken me to a place that sits comfortably with the things I was later to discover. More recently I was invited to preach at the local Anglican priory and having asked if I could choose one of the hymns, I found myself struggling to find something that would fit the journey of the sermon, and so, another creation was born in 'Sowing seeds of love in lives'.

Quantum theology explores how new discoveries about the nature of creation and the nature of our humanity challenge our understanding of God, and invite us into a new understanding. Some see science as a threat to faith and yet if God is in everything then God is in science, and through science invites us to explore new ideas about ourselves and our relationships. We are a collection of constantly changing energy bound together by relationships – a statement which itself invites theological exploration. Add in the discovery that atoms can be in two places at the same time. That which has been connected can never be separated and when we

are connected to the collective conscious, or that which connects us all, we have the power to change the outcome of things that have already happened, then we have a lot of ideas to explore in relation to our understanding of God and Creation. Miracles really do happen, and the message of Jesus is about our oneness. If our hymns are to form and encourage a modern understanding of God, then we have a lot of hymn writing to do.

I offer you the three hymns I have mentioned, respecting my copyright please feel free to use them in your worship, and if you are inspired, or have been inspired, to be creative I would love to hear from you. We really do need some new hymns for the twenty-first century.

**You are here O God, you are here,** (Tune Kum ba yah)  
here within us God, you are here,  
all around us God, you are here.  
In you we are one.

In our praying God, you are here,  
words and silence, God, you are here,  
when we doubt O God, you are here.  
In you we are one.

In our singing God, you are here,  
in our sighing God, you are here,  
in our laughter God, you are here.  
In you we are one.

When we're sad, O God, you are here,  
when we're glad, O God, you are here,  
good or bad, O God, you are here.  
In you we are one.

When we're generous you are here,  
when we hoard too much, you are here,  
when we give our love, you are here.  
In you we are one.

You are here O God, you are here,  
here within us God, you are here,  
all around us God, you are here.  
In you we are one.

**The love of God is heav'n on earth,** (Tune Folksong)  
A meeting of all time and space;  
A glimpse of life beyond this life;  
A sense of God here face to face.

The love of God, when shared with friends,  
Becomes a place of peace and joy  
In laughter there we find our goal  
In tears we sense our journey on.

The love of God brings close Christ's hope  
A sense of one in mind and soul.  
Rememb'ring through the bread and wine  
the call to change and live for all.

The love of God sparks life in full;  
A sense of purpose to our day,  
Deep knowledge of God's world around,  
A longing for Christ's chosen way.

The love of God is heav'n on earth,  
A meeting of all time and space;  
So let us lift our hearts to God  
And learn to love within this place.

*(adapted, first note second bar becomes a dotted minim,  
replacing the second note)*

**We are pilgrims on a journey**, (Tune Regent's Square)  
following the path Christ shows;  
one with God and with all people,  
changing as the Spirit blows.  
We are called to share our story,  
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

When we gather here to worship,  
voices praising, hearts made whole,  
we encounter fresh ideas,  
new expressions light our soul.  
We are called to share our story,  
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

Life is like a mighty puzzle,  
piece by piece God is revealed;  
when we share our story gently  
other people can be healed.  
We are called to share our story,  
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

We are witness to God's wonder,  
seeing daily love divine,  
living, loving, being Jesus  
building kindom as a sign.  
We are called to share our story,  
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

Held in love and bathed in mercy,  
God within us we are one;  
ever open to the Spirit,  
as we grow and journey on.  
We are called to share our story,  
Sowing seeds of love in lives.



**Heather Whyte** is a United Reformed Church minister serving in Luton and Dunstable.

# Sing Hymns

## Singing Hymns for the First Time – in Guildford

On Sat 19 Jan Adrian Alker, Anne Padget and Andy Thomas braved the territory south of London to bring their PCN Great Britain workshop, subtitled Hymns for a Progressive Faith to Guildford United Reformed Church. Though not a PCN-affiliated church we take a strong interest in liberal theology as well as good music. We also do excellent cake!



Adrian had already sent us a varied list of hymns to preview and set up on our projector. Some very familiar and well-loved, some we thought we didn't know until we discovered to our relief that unfamiliar (and excellent) words were set to existing tunes we already sing. This approach, favoured by John Bell of the Iona community, was strongly commended to us by Adrian: it's enough to expect a congregation to tackle unseen words, without pitching them in to an unknown tune at the same time.

Of course it was core to the event to examine in more detail and discuss what the old and the new words said to us. This was not Songs of Praise! Adrian led lively interactive discussions about the words, and also at times the part the music plays in evoking our emotional response (sometimes closely linked to memories – good or bad). The participating audience was inter-denominational as we had publicised the event across the area and there were some contrasted views from Anglicans and URC members. There were very definite views for and sometimes against particular hymns, but the great thing was that we were thinking about what we were singing and why.

We ended the day with brains and lungs well-exercised and were very grateful to our three guests, as well as to our own excellent organist Gillian Lloyd, for travelling a long way to bring us this stimulating event.

Fiona Yeomans

## Membership

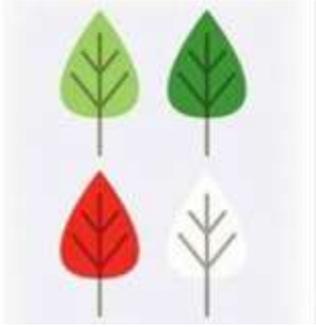
PCN Britain has charitable status, and depends wholly on its membership for funding the work we do. Membership of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain is for all who value an open, progressive and theologically radical voice within British Christianity, and want to maintain and promote that generous understanding of faith.

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# Secular Liturgies

## Rational Spirituality for a Post-Religious Age



### A Vision for the Future

The British Social Attitudes Surveys show that religious affiliation has declined steeply, and continues to do so. 50% of British people no longer identify with a religious faith, and many who do, are non-practising. The percentage of 18-24 year olds with no religious affiliation is significantly higher, at 64%. In Europe as a whole, we are certainly moving into a post-religious age, and many other nations are undergoing a similar transition, with the world's nonreligious now the third largest group of humans, exceeded in numbers only by Christians and Muslims. (See the reports by the National Centre for Social Research and the Pew Research Center)

However, while religion is losing ground, a secular, rational spirituality, which rejects dogma and superstition, has the potential to fill the void. Thus, on 13th July 2018, I launched the Secular Liturgies Network and Forum, to bring people together from many different cultural backgrounds, to explore common ground when it comes to developing, and creatively expressing, a secular ethic.

I am particularly keen to develop the concept and practice of rational spirituality. My focus in this regard, is on enriching secular life and culture with liturgical writings, and carefully choreographed liturgical events. These liturgical events will include creative writing, readings from philosophy, fiction and other literature, ritual, cultural heritage, and a variety of art forms. They will be organised around the following nine themes:

- Critical Thinking – truth, evidence, research, excellent science, responsibility
- Good Life – character, empathy, wisdom, courage, virtue, kindness, compassion
- Good Society – social justice, human rights, individual freedom, equality, democracy
- Sustainability – our place in nature, green lifestyles, religious naturalism
- Health and Well-being – reflection, meditation, mindfulness
- Big Culture – cultural exchange, diversity, comparative philosophy/religion

- Community – companionship, relationships, humour, fun, friendship
- Life-Cycles – birth and coming of age celebrations, weddings, funerals
- Seasons – annual and seasonal events following a secular calendar

### A Rational Spirituality

Spirituality, for most people, means a genuine pursuit of truth, goodness or virtue. It means experiencing awe and wonder, love and self-transcendence, and cultivating empathy and compassion for other living beings. Rational spirituality demands honesty, freedom, tolerance and equality, values running counter to the religious power structures that have been dominant for so long. It also means rediscovering and better appreciating our place in nature which contrasts with the efforts of traditional religion to set humanity apart from its natural origins and even to set us apart from the needs and pleasures of our own physical bodies.

Secular liturgies and events can help us to live out, both individually and communally, a fidelity to truth and kindness, even when they demand that we revise our assumptions or put aside our self-interest. They can facilitate a greater appreciation of the natural world (and our place within it), encourage a vigorous engagement with ethics, and induce experiences of self-transcendence through techniques such as mindfulness. They can cultivate empathy through self-understanding and the sharing of stories, and build community through regular socialisation at a meaningful depth.

### Defining Secular Liturgies

Secular liturgies are writings, and other liturgical expressions, such as ritual, meditation and art forms, which are read (or take place) at secular private or public gatherings. They explore, celebrate and convey the secular values of compassion, truth, freedom, equality, courage, tolerance and responsibility. They also seek to capture and communicate, in creative ways, the latest information and research that can help us to advance well-being and alleviate suffering. I hope that they will make secular cultures more resilient in difficult times, and inspire us to meet our global challenges.

The Network's definition of liturgy is very broad. It includes, more obviously, writings and readings, which are morally and/or intellectually instructive. However, it also includes words and activities, which are indirectly helpful to us, for example, by creating spaces for reflection or socialisation, or by defining rituals, which can instil healthy habits, practical wisdom, critical thinking and so forth. A story, a poem, a dance, the process of painting a picture, a journey, a piece of music, a period of silence, and even the shipping forecast- these may all be described as liturgy!

In addition to liturgies written for secular events, I am also keen to explore the possibility of integrating liturgy, and 'liturgical moments', into everyday life. Liturgies often define values, goals and cultural identity of groups, from the tattoos and graffiti of youth subcultures, to the word-art one finds in the homes and workplaces of the aspirational classes. Therefore, we will be exploring how elements of our secular liturgies and events on the nine themes may be creatively incorporated into our home, working and leisure environments.

### **A diverse community**

A distinctive feature of this movement is its diversity. We bring together those who would not normally work together, because although they have much in common in terms of shared values and goals, they have very different backgrounds, cultures, heritages and identities.

Related to this, is another distinctive feature, which I am calling our 'big culture' approach. By a 'big culture' approach, I mean that we seek to sift the golden nuggets of wisdom from the world's philosophical and religious traditions, in terms of both their thinking and practice, and apply it in the process of creating our secular liturgies and liturgical events. This requires a critical process of determining which parts of our inherited cultures (the literature, the objects, the rituals and traditions) conform to our secular values and goals, and which must be consigned to the past. I am of the view that while the 'bath water' needs to go, the 'baby' should not be thrown away, as the saying goes! Though of course, we need to keep the bath water in a museum somewhere, as a reminder of how far we have come!

Our Secular Liturgies community consists of humanists, atheists, agnostics, free-thinkers, sceptics, the nonreligious, the 'spiritual but not religious', Unitarians, Quakers, liberals from other denominations, and members of progressive religious reform movements, such as Progressive Christianity, Humanistic Judaism, Secular Buddhism and others. Not only can we learn so much more about other cultural perspectives but we can also gain a far better perspective on our own cultures.

### **A call for creative contributions**

We value your engagement with this exciting and experimental process of writing new liturgy, choreographing new liturgical events, and curating material and objects from existing literature and cultural heritage, according to the Nine Themes.

We invite you to contribute liturgical extracts, personal accounts/secular testimony, poetry, short stories, short dramatic scripts, photographs, audio-visually, and suggestions for readings, from novels, poetry, works of philosophy and other texts. Also welcome, are ideas for activities that may be integrated into secular liturgical events, such as meditations, community feasts, tea ceremonies, dance routines, multimedia (and other technological contributions), art exhibitions, songs, and other musical compositions.

### **Secular liturgy: an example**

Below is an extract from my own liturgical writing, just to give you an idea of the variety of forms it can take. The following 'vows' can be used at coming of age celebrations, or at ceremonies for the re-affirmation of vows, or they could simply be spoken as part of a liturgy for regular communal use.

#### **The Twelve Vows for Life**

1. I shall be faithful to the principles of liberty, equality and sustainability.
2. I shall take time to rest and contemplate the beauty of the Earth and its inhabitants.
3. I shall study the brave, noble and kindly acts of my fellow humans, both my peers and my predecessors, and take inspiration from them.
4. I shall honour my family with gratitude and loving-kindness, and I shall be a comfort to my friends, knowing the richness that brings.
5. I shall be forgiving and compassionate towards others, since all of us are flawed, fellow-sufferers in a troubled world, dependent upon one another for our survival and flourishing. I shall do so from gratitude, since so many have been generous towards me.
6. I shall be compassionate towards other animals and the Earth, for they too sustain and enrich my life.
7. I shall work to bring justice, healing and peace to humanity and the Earth, and I shall refrain from doing harm.
8. I shall endeavour to pursue noble goals with diligence and care, so that I may make a valuable contribution to the world, and so that I may set a courageous example for others.
9. I shall speak kindly of others and truthfully of myself.
10. I shall respect the person and possessions of others, being honest in all my dealings.
11. I shall always seek the truth, by studying the evidence, listening to others, and taking time to come to my conclusions and judgments. I shall not ignore evidence I do not like, or seek out or invent evidence, which appears to confirm my own assumptions, or which advances my own interests, and which is a deliberate attempt to mislead others.
12. I shall be content with what I have, rejoicing in the success of others, while working hard to better myself.



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# The Conversion of Rabbi Jesus

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The gospel writers had their own spin and agendas just as I have my own prejudices, likes and dislikes. I suggest that, as progressives, it is right that we all discern the Jesus that makes sense individually to each one of us. After all, this is exactly what Dom Crossan does. His superb critical historic research is permeated with creative conjecture and interpretation. In a similar way, this article is an insight into the historic Jesus whom I understand, experience and makes sense to me.

My starting point is as a non-theist, no longer believing in an interventionist god. However, there is a sacredness that Tillich called "God above God" and Rahner called the "Infinite Mystery". As far as I am concerned, all gods and all scriptures are human creations – the result of the search for understanding and the outcome of the human struggle with the sacred. Rabbi Jesus is my dark glass glimpse of that Infinite Mystery.

Much of institutional and traditional Christianity continues to 'over-spiritualise' the Scriptures in a way in which they were never intended to be interpreted. The earliest Christian scriptures were written, not so much as heavenly expositions but as earthly social and political commentaries on the events and times in which people were living, and set within the historic and sacred contexts of Judaism. Our early written records concerning Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth told of the struggles of the writers to try to understand what their God was doing in their time and place. As such, Bible stories may not be true, but truth can be found in them.

And the Radical Jesus is not so much a theological discussion as a way of community life in response to his continuing invitation to "Follow me." And being a 'prayer of repentance' kind of Christian is easy, but to follow the Way of Rabbi Jesus is anything but easy because it is the way of the gutter and of the cross. It is the way of dying to self in service to others.

Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth was no 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild.' Such a version of Rabbi Jesus was a political and religious corruption of the real man and his message by mid to late first century CE writers of the texts who were having to live within a society that was brutalised, overwhelmed and oppressed by the Roman Empire.

Rome, like most empires before and since, maintained power and control through violence and military force. Such was the Pax Romana – it brought peace and prosperity to Rome, but at the cost of all those nations and tribes that had been overcome by the military skill and ultimate might of the legions. In this world of division, exploitation and tribalism, the necessity of preserving their Hebrew tribal culture, ethnicity and religion was paramount. Even Jesus initially believed the tribal stories and acted as though YHWH, as the one true God, was interested only in the welfare of the Hebrews.

Rabbi Jesus was a Galilean and, to some extent Galilee and Perea were spared the direct rule by Rome because, although separated by Samaria, they were part of the kingdom that had been allocated by the Roman occupiers to Herod Antipas. Perhaps Rome handed the governance of Galilee to Herod so that he and the Herodians could take the local flak, because Galilee in particular was a hotbed of rebellion. For 50 or so years before Jesus and through to at least 135 CE with the rebellion led by Bar Kosiba, Galilee was the most unmanageable of all Palestinian territory. It was known not just as a geographical area but as a region of deeply troubling, politically motivated Zealot insurrection.

Even the religious Galilean Pharisees took a very different line to the Pharisaic elite in Jerusalem. They ignored many of the Mosaic laws. Rabbi Jesus himself plucked ears of corn and healed on the Sabbath, just as he failed to ritually wash his hands before eating. However, he was seen to be a faithful Jew, at least by his Galilean followers, but was rejected by the Pharisaic elite as being part of the rural anarchic riff raff.

However, he set out on his ministry in a tribal Pharisaic manner – YHWH was only concerned with the Jews. He was not inoculated against such Pharisaic tribalism. After all, he was born and raised into a tribal society. The history of his nation and tribe was one of conquering and of being conquered. So much of the Hebrew Bible contains stories of Hebrew tribalism. Often, when its armies defeated the enemy there was wholesale ethnic cleansing and economic exploitation in the name of YHWH. Often when the people of YHWH were defeated they also suffered ethnic cleansing and economic exploitation in the name of the god of their conquerors.

For progressives such as Borg, Crossan and Spong there are the pre-Easter and the post-Easter Jesus'. However, as I experience it there were two other Jesus', first the pre-radical Rabbi Jesus and, following his visit to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, the post-conversion social, economic and religious radical Rabbi Jesus.

In Mark 7:24-30 there is the turning point in the life of Rabbi Jesus. It was his confrontation with the gentile Syrophenician woman that converted Jesus from an exclusive tribal wisdom teacher and healer of the Hebrews into an inclusive radical welcomer of all people. This gentile woman had a daughter who was ill. In desperation the mother went to Jesus and begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Jesus gave the typical Pharisaic tribal reply, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

It was the courage of this Syrophenician woman - a second class national of a second class gender – to look beyond her own gentile tribalism to change Jesus forever. This new, radical, gentile-inspired vision of Jesus of Nazareth, was the full embodiment of compassionate love that led to the breaking down of cultural, ethnic, gender and religious barriers within his followers. (Although it took Peter another decade to understand!)

This new vision of Jesus the Pharisaic Galilean Rabbi was seen by the social, political and religious elites to be both offensive and threatening in its challenge to their power and privilege. It was interpreted as an attack upon the tribalism of his birth religion, especially as this was a Gentile woman speaking directly to a male Pharisaic Jew.

This new radical realisation was that to live in peace was nothing to do with the tribalism of keeping the 613 Laws of Moses, but was everything to do with the compassionate acceptance of all as fellow human beings of equal worth and children of the same One God of All.

Rabbi Jesus came to the realisation that religion was no longer to be used to separate or to hold power over members or outsiders. It also enabled him to radically transcend tribal culture and tradition, and to experience love beyond human created boundaries. For him the purity of faith was no longer to be centred upon the legalism and exclusivism of the Pharisaic elite, but upon inclusive compassion.

From this story in Mark's Gospel onward, Jesus became more concerned with a radical Judaism that was inclusive, no longer excluding those considered to be 'enemies' within or enemies without, especially those who might water down the elitist Pharisaic social, ethnic or religious cultures. No wonder the religious and political hierarchies quickly sought to have him killed, especially when the post-conversion Rabbi Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. It was full of things his followers were invited to do and not a word about what they were required to believe. Fast forward to 325 CE and the Church was presented with the Nicene Creed, all about required words of belief and not a single word about what we should do to follow Rabbi Jesus.

The new radicalism of Rabbi Jesus was not afraid of being counter-cultural – of being out of step with the thinking and ways of the world. It put a life-style of being and doing above and beyond the tribalism of elitist Pharisaism. Sadly, the Apostle Paul, a Pharisee, created a Jesus that suited him, a Jesus that was subsequently locked into the creeds and doctrines of the Church. However, following the Way of Rabbi Jesus is a life-style that goes beyond what American Christian philosopher Dallas Willard used to call "Vampire Christians" who only wanted enough of Jesus' blood to save them from hell, but had no intentions of actually really following Jesus by putting his radical words into daily practice.

The post-conversion radicalism of Rabbi Jesus continues



Jean Germain Drouais CC0 Public Domain  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Jean Germain Drouais\\_-\\_The\\_Woman\\_of\\_Canaan\\_at\\_the\\_Feet\\_of\\_Christ\\_-\\_WGA06696.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Jean_Germain_Drouais_-_The_Woman_of_Canaan_at_the_Feet_of_Christ_-_WGA06696.jpg)

today in inviting his followers to make a non-violent public stand against injustice. It involves a rethinking of greatness, no longer seen in power, influence and wealth but in compassionate service to the other. It continues to be about putting the needs of the least as paramount and accepting and including folk just as they are. It is concerned with economic and gender equality. It is also leading a number of his followers today to encourage and support one another within small non-judgemental, para-church communities that do not try to clone or to fix one another.

The post-conversion radicalism of Rabbi Jesus was, and remains, concerned with restorative justice in which the excluded, the marginalised and those considered to be sinners are included. Its modus operandi is:

- caring for the poor is not charity – it is justice;
- feeding the hungry is not charity – it is justice;
- giving drink to the thirsty is not charity – it is justice;
- welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the asylum seeker is not charity – it is justice;
- giving shelter and clothing to those who are in need is not charity – it is justice;
- taking care of the sick is not charity – it is justice;
- visiting and supporting those imprisoned within themselves or within penal institutions is not charity – it is justice.

So, in these perilous times for church membership I suggest that we need not be afraid of denominational death. Following the radicalism of Rabbi Jesus might just be the birthing of a truly community based, experiential and undiluted radical Jesus fit for purpose in our post-modern world.



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# Science and Miracles?

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The relationship between science and religion has always been a complex one. As science has advanced our knowledge it has challenged many of the assumptions upon which faith has been based. No longer do we think of heaven “up there” with God seated upon a throne listening to “angel-voices ever singing”. No longer do we think our world as the centre of the universe, and our belief in our special status in God’s plan is challenged by our knowledge of evolution. This has often been perceived in terms of a conflict between science and religion and, for some, science disproves religious belief.

The suggestion of conflict between science and religion is however an oversimplification. Whilst present day “creationists” who believe in the literal truth of the Genesis story may wish to deny the veracity of many of the advances in modern natural science, the link between science and religion has been closer than one might assume. The great scientists of the early modern scientific age, Newton and Boyle, did not see their findings as denying the existence of God only what they considered the myths of organised religion. In recent times there has been a growing realisation that science is not as certain as was previously believed and that scientific knowledge is always advancing, often overturning earlier theories. Scientists are having to accept that one cannot say that a theory is true even though rigorously tested over a period of time. It only remains the best available theory until it is disproved (if ever) or superseded by a better theory. The physical world can no longer be seen as mechanical but in which some things remain predictable, but others are open to the possibility of new developments. As stated by the renowned physicist and priest, John Polkinghorne: “such a world of intertwined order and novelty is just what might be expected as the creation of a God both faithful and loving, who will endow his world with twin gifts of reliability and freedom”. (Reason and Reality, 1991 p.45)

The recognition that science cannot provide all the answers has opened the way to greater dialogue between science and religion and the exploration of the relationship between the two. It is argued that both are seeking explanations but from a different perspective. Thus, science asks the “how” question while religion asks “why” and seeks to offer meaning. Thus, for example, advances in scientific knowledge can raise difficult and complex ethical issues and religion has a role to play in assisting the definition of boundaries. This has resulted in a growing interest in the relationship between science and religion leading to its being recognised as an academic discipline.

To accept that there is a God who is, in some way, the creator is not difficult. However, a much more complex issue is whether, and to what extent, God can intervene and act in contravention of the physical laws God has

created. If one denies that God can, or that God does, one is embracing Deism (the belief in a God who created the universe and set it going but no longer intervenes). If, on the other hand, one accepts that God can intervene, one is faced with the challenging theological problem of seeking to explain why God intervenes in one situation and not in another even though it may be equally worthy. Further, if God can intervene why does it appear to be so random? Why does God permit the horrors of natural disasters, war and plagues?

Despite these difficulties, divine intervention in the form of signs, wonders and miracles are an important feature of most religious traditions. In Judaism, for example, the Torah is full of signs and wonders performed by God as evidence that the Hebrews were the chosen people while the Books of Kings tells of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha being miracle workers. At the end of the second Temple period (C1<sup>st</sup> BCE and C1<sup>st</sup> CE) there was a strong movement of charismatic Judaism which produced holy men, termed Hasidim or Devout, who were reputed to possess supernatural powers and were believed to have direct access to God and performed their miracles of rain making and healings by prayer. (e.g. Honi ha M’Agel in C1<sup>st</sup> BCE and, in C1<sup>st</sup> CE, Hanina ben Dosa) The Oxford scholar, Geza Vermes, argued that “Jesus is to be seen as part of 1<sup>st</sup> century charismatic Judaism and a paramount example of the early Hasidim or Devout”. (Jesus the Jew, p.60) Reports of the miraculous powers of these holy men, including Jesus and his disciples, appear not only in rabbinical sources but in the writings of C1<sup>st</sup> historian, Josephus.

These stories, including the miracles of Jesus, may be dismissed by the scientist as mere myths or folklore. On the other hand, there may be some truth in them especially in the case of exorcisms and healings. As Polkinghorne observes, “The recognition of the psychosomatic character of some illness makes it more intelligible that there are indeed healing powers which some people seem to possess” and “Jesus possessed such powers to the highest degree.” (Quarks, Chaos and Christianity, p.80) This suggestion gains further strength when one takes into account that these healings took place in C1<sup>st</sup> Galilee which, being separated from Judea and Jerusalem, was inhabited by devout people of deep but unsophisticated faith. This explanation is, of course, only valid for the miracles relating to the healing of the sick. However, there are other forms of miracles which involve influencing or exercising control over the elements where those seeking a rational explanation resort to suggestions of such things as coincidence, hidden sandbanks and a fierce squall blowing itself out. None of this is satisfactory and it is easy to remain sceptical about the truth of stories about miracles. This is a real issue for the Christian as all four of the Gospels portray Jesus not just as a great teacher but also one

with extra-ordinary powers to heal the sick and to exercise control over the elements.

It would be a serious mistake to dismiss or seek to marginalise the stories of miracles in the Gospels. In the case of Mark, the earliest Gospel, 168 of 666 verses up to chapter 16.8 relate to Jesus as a miracle worker. There is no other figure of the period with as many miracles associated with them. They must therefore have a greater significance than just myths inserted to enhance Jesus' status. To discover what this significance is, the scientist must look to others in the academy especially those in the theology faculty with experience and expertise in studying ancient Jewish texts. They will tell the scientist that the Bible is not intended to be read literally but should be read taking account of a form of Jewish theological writing known midrash. The word "midrash" is from the Hebrew word darash meaning to probe and examine. Thus, the scholar examines the text (or story) from all sides, to find interpretations not immediately obvious and to illustrate the future by appealing to the past. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of complexities of midrash. Suffice it to say that the Gospels were written by Jews (The possible exception is Luke but he would have been a "God-fearer" and regular attender at the synagogue) who would have had experience of midrash and extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible from which they would have drawn material to tell the story of Christ in the midrash tradition. They were never intended to be read as a historical account of the life of Jesus but rather to proclaim, "the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God". The stories of Jesus' miraculous deeds were not written as factual accounts or intended to be read literally. As theologian Jeffrey John has explained, the miracles of Jesus are examples of Haggadic midrash. (The Meaning of Miracles, p.7) They were composed in the form of short Haggadah leaving it to the reader to discover their theological meaning by reflecting on them in the context of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, if one seeks to look at the story of the wedding at Cana as a factual account, it can seem absurd as each of the six stone jars would have held 20 gallons. Does one really need 120 gallons of wine at the end of a wedding celebration? Does the story of the feeding of the 5000/4000 seem credible? Surely, as Galilee was a noted rebellious province, Herod Antipas and the Romans have perceived a crowd the size of a legion as a threat to security and disperse it? Yet looking at these as examples of Haggadah one sees underlying the wedding in Cana an association with, inter alia, the messianic feast while in the feeding of the 5000 one finds, inter alia, a portrayal of Jesus as a new Moses. Thus, these and the other miracles of Jesus are an integral part of the "good news" telling us about his identity and his vision of the kingdom of God. Just as the scientist uses their knowledge and expertise to analyse and interpret data to support any theory so the biblical scholar uses their knowledge and experience to interpret the scriptures.



There is however one miracle that differs from the rest, and that is the resurrection of Jesus which has been a fundamental belief of Christianity from the earliest times. We are told that following his crucifixion Jesus was buried, but on the third day he was raised from the dead by God and appeared to his followers. There are differences in the details of the resurrection narrative between the Gospels which suggests the use of Haggadah. (For a detailed discussion see Spong, Myth or Reality.) On the other hand, others argue that science cannot disprove the possibility of resurrection. As N T Wright explains: "science observes what normally happens, the Christian case is that what happened to Jesus is not what normally happens" (The Meaning of Jesus, p.124) However, whatever view one takes of the details of the Easter narrative, the fact remains that, after the execution of their leader for sedition, the followers of Jesus fled into hiding. They returned to Jerusalem where they regrouped and experienced his presence so intensely that they began to proclaim his message with renewed vigour and confidence in Galilee, Judea and Samaria and across the much of eastern Mediterranean, rapidly gaining new followers not only among the Jews but also the gentiles. It is difficult to find a rational explanation for the speed with which this happened, nor for the continuing experience of Jesus in the lives of Christians around the world.

The miracles of Jesus can, if taken literally, present problems not only to the scientist but also to many Christians but they should not be dismissed. As is suggested, if seen as a form of Haggadah, they become an integral part of the Christian message as proclaimed in the Gospels. However, perhaps one should add a word of caution by adapting an old Hasidic saying..." [a person] who believes all the miracles performed by [Jesus] actually happened is a fool, but anyone who believes that they could not have happened is an unbeliever".



**Nigel Bastin** is a retired legal academic and served as a churchwarden during a twelve year vacancy.

# Communion: Bridge or Barrier

*Is Communion a bridge or is it a barrier to spiritual growth, to Christian faith, to God?*

## **A hallowed bridge**

The great majority of the worldwide Christian family, I surmise, view the occasion as a hallowed bridge over which God's 'holy energy' may pass to nurture the innermost self, or soul, of communicants.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is deemed so special that much of its observation takes place beyond an icon screen dividing 'earth' where the congregation gathers and 'heaven' which only priests may enter.

For Roman Catholics, Mass is pre-eminent among their seven sacraments and central to church life. It is celebrated wherever priests are available and is the climax to great gatherings, such as those that take place on international papal visits.

Across the Anglican spectrum, the Eucharist is the central sacrament and widely believed to be a superior means of spiritual nurture to the Ministry of the Word.

Practice varies widely in Free Churches. In some, the service is barely distinguishable from mainstream Anglican practice with participants going up to the 'altar' rail. In others, conduct of 'The Lord's Supper' is simple and brief with stewards, deacons or elders taking the elements to the seated congregation.

So, for most of Christendom celebration of Communion is a crucial feature of Church life, if not its apex, and regarded as a 'holy bridge' conveying the Grace of God to those sharing in the rite. Generally, the flow of divine power is supervised by an ordained or appointed officiant. For Roman Catholics, the supreme bridge is the Pope, appropriately named Pontiff. What's more, many, if not most communicants, find the celebration uplifting and enriching. They like the poetry and beauty of the language, the colourful vestments and graceful rituals, the mystique and mystery evoked by the 'bells and smells', the ceremony's witness to the suffering and self-giving of Jesus, and its befriending power expressed in the sharing of The Peace.

## **But is it really vital to discipleship?**

Two numerically small yet disproportionately influential Christian 'churches', the Salvation Army and Society of Friends, don't observe Communion at all. Yet who would deny the profound godliness of their members and the Christ-like work they do? Salvationists take the teaching and example of Jesus with the utmost seriousness, serving the marginalized of society with a passion. Quakers apply Jesus' message of reconciliation to a degree greater than any communion-practising church. Both are strong and wide bridges of the transforming goodness and love we identify as God.

I am also reassured by the major shift in the BBC Radio 4 Sunday morning worship pattern. In contrast to

previous practice, services which include Communion have become the exception. Recognizing that its celebration limits the opportunity to explore important worship themes adequately, the forty-minute slot now provides time for relatively in-depth exploration and reflection. As exemplified by a service in 2016 from Manchester's Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Name. It nevertheless facilitated a 'surge of grace' as it unpicked and applied the Pope's momentous Encyclical Letter 'Laudato Si' on care for our 'Common Home', planet Earth. I feel that this urgent message to all humanity is far more Kingdom-building than any Communion ritual.

My lukewarm attitude to Communion goes back to childhood when I attended a Baptist church. Apart from the odd Children's Address, the main service was one to be endured rather than enjoyed. But the Lord's Supper which followed, one morning a month, was the last straw, with its interminable extempore prayer of thanksgiving that habitually became a prayer for everything under the sun. Though I was bemused by the clinking that reverberated round the church when communicants returned the little glasses to their holes in the shelf in front. When I went away to school and attended the 8.00am Church of England Communion service I felt very virtuous, but I'm not sure whether it really helped me be a better disciple. And, to this day, I remain unconvinced that the ritual is the vital and incomparable bridge of grace many claim it is.

## **What did Jesus intend?**

My overriding concern stems from the story which gave rise to the ritual – about what happened in that upstairs room shortly before Jesus's arrest and execution, and what Jesus intended by his words and actions. The short answer is we cannot be certain. For the Gospel writers were more interested in meaning than historicity. The words we use in Communion today are the result of a hazardous process involving memory, oral tradition, written reports, editing and translation. However, in spite of hindsight and interpretation, the story we have is extremely likely to have a factual core for it centres on a searingly memorable experience. Aware that the authorities were closing in and that it would be the last chance for them to sup together, Jesus took the opportunity to invite the Twelve, whenever they met to eat and drink in the future, to let the bread and wine be reminders of his life, ministry and imminent self-giving. Such remembering would be important for his immediate, as well as subsequent, disciples.

And yet, put in the context of Jesus' entire ministry of between two and three years, the 'last supper' was but a brief moment, its essence described in just four verses in Mark and Matthew, seven in Luke, and only three in Paul's first letter to Corinth. So, has the Church I wonder,

got an originally brief and simple act – a tiny fragment of Jesus's ministry - out of all proportion?

The Church's focus on the death of Jesus, through its various forms of Communion, is further emphasized in its historic declarations of faith. The Apostle's Creed, for instance, jumps from Jesus being 'born of the Virgin Mary' straight to his suffering 'under Pontius Pilate' and subsequent crucifixion, death and burial. There is no mention whatsoever of his ministry with its transforming teaching, all-embracing compassion and vital commitment to building the 'Kingdom of God'. In contrast to the Sermon on the Mount anthology which is all about conduct and life-style, most Church liturgies elevate belief and doctrine. Surely, exposition of Jesus' life and ministry – through Bible reading and sermons, for instance - is at least an equal 'bridge of grace'!

#### **A barrier to faith?**

Another feature of the Gospel story that bugs me centres on the imagery Jesus used, and whether he wanted it to be taken literally. Since so much of his teaching and conversation engaged poetry and parable, isn't it reasonable to believe his association of bread with his flesh and wine with his blood was purely metaphorical? I hope I'm right for I find, in the light of science (a vital avenue of truth about the nature of reality), the claim that the Communion elements really do become the body and blood of Jesus, as the 'high Church' doctrine of transubstantiation affirms, totally unbelievable. What's more, I find a literal application of the imagery aesthetically repugnant with its 'overtones of cannibalism', as someone put it to me after a service in which I had used the traditional words. For those brought up in a secular and science-orientated environment - now the majority of British citizens - I suspect that too much of what goes on in church worship, not least Communion, could appear to be mumbo-jumbo, a barrier rather than a bridge to faith.

Whatever our personal thoughts, feelings and preferences, I believe the time has come to take a long and hard look at all our liturgies and in particular the place and nature of Communion.

We should rigorously re-assess its Biblical status, its contemporary value, its form and frequency, and be prepared to change our priorities and practices accordingly.

We need to try and read the minds of the sceptical multitudes and ensure all our worship is a bridge, not a barrier, to the energizing mystery we call God.



**Edward Hulme** was ordained as a Baptist before joining the URC. He has promoted progressive Christianity through preaching, teaching, lecturing and writing.

# Introducing

## Jenny Jacobs

### PCN Britain Trustee

My family are refugees – from Germany, Russia and Poland. All arrived escaping persecution - my maternal grandfather leaving Russia around 1909, my father, aged 9, leaving Berlin in 1938. Family members who did not leave perished in or on the way to Auschwitz.



My family history informs my attitude to refugees today.

I grew up in a secular Jewish household – religion often felt like a club from which I was excluded. Nevertheless, I was exposed to quite a bit of it. My mum sent us off to the local Baptist's, at school I attended Scripture Union and we'd visit my Orthodox grandparents for Pesach and Chanukah.

I went to one Billy Graham rally and succumbed to mass hysteria. The next morning I felt as if my mind had been co-opted and, with a shudder, let the effect slip from me like an unclean garment.

At university (York) I read Philosophy. Realising the traditional "proofs for the existence of God" proved nothing of the sort, I went through an atheist phase. But still, underneath, I was searching.

I qualified as a Chartered Surveyor, married and had two sons, now 26 & 31. Work and family life absorbed me for many years but, following my divorce, felt able and willing to resume the search. I started reading somewhat haphazardly and came across Borg and Crossan.

I'd started attending services at Ripon Cathedral but then I heard about and visited the Unitarians and from the very first service knew I'd found my spiritual home. Finally I'd found a whole group of people with very different backgrounds and different spiritual paths, but all travelling hopefully together in an atmosphere of safety, seeking and companionship. It was a bit like a PCN group at prayer. Four years on, I'm a member and a worship leader at York Unitarians.

I'm a member of the Effective Altruism movement, having joined Giving What We Can in 2012, and am an active member of my local Green Party. I sing with Wetherby Choral Society. And I'm still working; for my Local Authority, I negotiate affordable housing with developers, and for the Ministry of Justice, sit as a valuer member in the First-Tier Tribunal.

# Not Waving but Drowning

The poet Stevie Smith is often regarded as a sort of Edward Lear, James Thurber or Ogden Nash: her whimsical drawings, gnomonic versifying, and acid wit, all help to confirm that view. Yet there is much more to her life and work than that. She could write (in 'The Hat') 'Mother said if I wore this hat / I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap'; but she could also write (in 'Was He Married?') 'A god is Man's doll, you ass, / He makes him up like this on purpose.' She refers to herself as a 'lapsed atheist' and examining her work helps us understand that belief and unbelief are never fixed.

Florence Margaret Smith (1902-71), known as 'Stevie', was born in Hull, went to London with her mother and sister when her father ran off to sea, and was brought up by her mother's sister Aunt Molly (Stevie calls her 'The Lion Aunt'). She worked as a secretary to the Pearson /Newnes publishing organization between 1923-1953, left with a nervous breakdown, became well-known through poetry readings (many on the BBC), and attracted the friendship and admiration of many readers, including Sylvia Plath. Life often shapes work, and in this case, her depressive nature, distrust of men, introverted and bookish character, 'explain' much of it.

She was sceptical about religious institutions - she hated the condescension and self-indulgent aestheticism of the Anglican church. Yet she attracts serious critical attention for her opinions about faith and belief. And I'll try to separate out some of these.

It is good to revisit her work (poems and prose alike). A sign that she is still read can be easily found in how often her most popular poems are anthologized - poems like 'Not Waving but Drowning' (1957) stay famous, and the phrase itself has passed into general language (it refers to a drowning man who cannot attract attention). Indeed, 'not waving but drowning' might serve as a metaphor for her approach to belief - wondering if there was no hope, hoping there is some wonder.

Like George Herbert and R.S. Thomas, being a Christian provokes strong feelings, of anger as well as hope, and for her being a Christian in itself was a problem. This is captured clearly in lines from her poem 'God the Eater' (from 'Not Waving but Drowning'): 'There is a god in whom I do not believe / Yet to this god my love stretches, / This god whom I do not believe in is / My whole life, my life and I am his.' She says she gives this god 'Everything that I have of pleasure and pain'. She often returns to the theme of death and ends the poem: 'When I am dead, I hope that he will eat / Everything I have been and have not been...'. Like so many men and women engaged in the journey of faith, she thinks she cannot live with God, nor without God. She even wonders whether 'it' is a 'God' or a 'god'.

She refers to herself as a 'lapsed atheist'. Yet she is drawn to Christianity, and concentrates on this

dilemma in the long dramatic monologue 'How Do You See?' ('Scorpion and Other Poems', 1972). She starts by asking how we see the Holy Ghost - 'the holy spirit of good'. Yet that is the problem, it is a beautiful idea 'productive of good' 'as Christianity now is .. / So that a person who does not believe the Christian faith / Feels he must keep silent, in case good suffers'. 'But must we allow good to be hitched to a lie, / A beautiful cruel lie, a beautiful fairy story'. She argues that 'we should put away the beautiful fairy stories / And learn to be good in a dull way without enchantment'.

The poem goes on to speak of how the Holy Ghost instructs and endorses 'the dreadful bargain, that God would take and offer / The death of the Son to buy our faults away': she cries out - 'Oh, Holy Ghost what do you mean as to Christ?'. 'You never answer our questions'. The consolations are beautiful, 'but not when you look close.' 'Oh Christianity... / Is it not time for you to vanish? / I do not think we shall be able to bear much longer the dishonesty / Of clinging for comfort to beliefs we do not believe in.' And in another poem, 'The Airy Christ' (1957), fresh from reading Mark's Gospel, she says that she knows the song is there but many people - including herself - do not hear it or choose not to. Too often they compromise by calling good by the name of God (paraphrasing a line in 'Away, Melancholy', 1957).

She approached theology and philosophy as an intellectual. Indeed, the frame of reference for her poetry and prose is wide-ranging - Blake, Tennyson, Whitman, Byron, Coleridge, Crashaw, the Classics. In her novel 'The Holiday' (1947), she discusses 'The Christian Solution'. She had been reading Aldous Huxley's biography of Richelieu 'Grey Eminence', C.S. Lewis's 'The Screwtape Letters', and 'Death and Life' by Father Martin D'Arcy (author of 'The Nature of Belief', 1931). Early on, she says, she 'felt exalted and relieved' - 'the Christian solution seemed to be the one'.

Yet 'it is too tidy by far... a diminution and a lie... These rewards and punishments... this father-son-teacher-pupil idea... too much bears the human wish for something finished off and tidy... It is the most tearing and moving thing, this wish to gain marks and approval, to plod on, with personal and loving chastisement, to infinity... The truth is that people cannot bear to be beaten'. She ends by saying 'I don't believe a word of it... It cannot be like this, I said, it is not possible.' In her poem 'A Dream of Comparison' (1957), she describes an encounter between Mary and Eve 'where they talked philosophically'. Eve longs for nothing, Mary argues for something; Eve shows despair, Mary shows hope. 'And they talked until nightfall, / But the difference between them was radical'. One reason why some people say they believe, as opposed to being atheists, is that they prefer something to nothing.

It is as if in her mind there are these conflicting impulses. Elsewhere, she says she prefers death to God - 'Who would not rather die / And quiet lie / Beneath the sod / With or without a god?' (in the poem 'Come, Death (I)' ('Tender Only to One', 1938). Some poems are explicitly theological, as 'Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell' ('Selected Poems', 1962).

The poem suggests that Christians try 'in vain' to 'separate themselves ... from the doctrine of eternal pain. / They cannot do it, / They are committed to it, / The Lord said it, / They must believe it.' Christianity is, therefore, a mixture 'of sweetness and cruelty'. If that's the sort of God Christians believe in, then 'have none of it, / Blow it away, have done with it.' Let such a God go.

Yet for all that, many feel a real sense of loss, a kind of emotional and intellectual bereavement, if (or when) we give up on it. In her essay 'The Necessity of Not Believing' (1958), she says that 'There is no reason to be sad, as some people are sad when they feel religion slipping off from them. There is no reason to be sad, it is a good thing.' Waving, then, and not drowning! Thinking things through, embarking on authentic reflective self-inquiry of the kind the best kind of agnosticism recommends. Such things test the boundaries between belief and unbelief and are worth re-visiting regularly.

One of her best-known poetry collections was 'A Good Time Was Had by All', 1937. Again, this phrase has come into the general language. Although her work matured, with increased existential and emotional depth, the poem 'Breughel' in this early collection takes us back to what it is to believe 'after all' and 'despite it all'.

Breughel's art, of course, represents humanity with scorching honesty, and, by that token, Stevie Smith takes up the theme of sinful people 'Prenatally biased' who 'Grow worsen [sic] born bad'. They sicken, have no strength, want God to help, rush towards an inevitable death. 'Is it "irrevocable"?', she asks. 'From tower and steeple / ring out funeral bells / Oh Lord save thy people / They have no help else'.

Perhaps this is artful and disingenuous: she was after all highly skilled at pastiche (here of hymns) and the faux-naïf (how can I know, just little me?!). Perhaps it is a genuine cry for help, as Emily Dickinson and even Christina Rossetti. Yet, if she admits to being a 'lapsed atheist', and if we examine the evidence in her poetry and prose as we have it, there seems a good case to support the view that being lapsed was a matter of conscience and guilt for her, caught as she seemed to have been (and as many of us are) between wanting the Church and not wanting it, believing and not believing. Stevie Smith is very much a poet for our times.



**Stuart Hannabuss** is a member of the Aberdeen PCN group, honorary chaplain at Aberdeen University, and an active musician.

# My First Night

*Thoughts from the Sinai Desert*

I lie down at night  
Alone in the wide world  
With sand beneath me  
And the whole sky above  
Littered with stars and a crescent moon

I lie enchanted, unable to sleep  
Alone in this huge expanse  
And yet part of the whole  
Not afraid, but trusting in God.

I sleep enfolded in peace  
And wake to a clear, blue sky  
AND NO STARS !

Yet the stars are still there  
Just not visible to me

How much else of the world  
Do we miss  
By not looking  
In the right place  
At the right time  
With open eyes?

Anne Burge

# Silent Flight

In the silence  
The clarity of your voice,  
Climbs high  
Upon the eagle's wings.  
The chains of doubt  
That imprison my soul,  
Fall away beneath my feet.  
In the freedom and majesty  
Of the sentinel's gaze,  
Faith is strengthened  
And hope returned  
To a weary heart,  
Upon the silent flight  
Of eagle's wings

Chris Roe

# News from local groups

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

## Abingdon

Cliff Marshall

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We have been focusing on the issues raised by Keith Ward's book, *Love is His Meaning*. This will culminate in a public talk to be given by Keith on Wed 13 Mar at 7.30pm at Trinity Church, Abingdon, OX14 1DU. This meeting will give a direction for our future discussions. Looking ahead we shall be encouraging members to attend the conference on 8 June and shall hopefully follow this up when Adrian Alker visits in the summer. Our group meets at 7.30pm on 5 Mar at St Peter's Church Room, Drayton, OX14 4JS and then on 2 Apr, 7 May and 4 June at St Michael's Church Room, Abingdon OX14 1DU. All details will be on our webpage. Typically between 14 and 20 members, drawn from our growing contact group of at least 29, attend for discussions which are always interesting and are valued for the open and accepting approach we adopt.

## Bolton

Jim Hollyman

01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our next meetings will be at 1.30pm on Wed 13 Feb and Wed 13 Mar. We will be looking at Adrian Alker's "Is a Radical Church Possible?" Adrian calls for an honest look at the life of Jesus and the faith of the Church and suggests a radical and more honest reshaping of the churches to enable them to face the challenges of the present day. Our meetings are on the second Wed of each month at 1.30pm until about 3 pm. 121 Junction Road, Bolton, BL3 4NF.

## Cardiff, Pontprennau

Andy Long

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We now meet in the house of one of our members and have been studying Dave Tomlinson's book 'Black Sheep and Prodigals' together.

## Chesterfield

John Simmonds

01246 251599 john.simmonds@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our group of 12 or so meets monthly in each other's homes, ending with a BYO lunch. In Jan we sat together more formally to mark the season. We are happy to welcome back Christine and

John Simmonds after a period of illness. On a member's recommendation we are looking at 'Blue Sky God' by Don McGregor (Circle Books). A clergyman in West Wales with a scientific background and it helps you think through a variety of issues. It seeks to join 'up current scientific view of reality with Christian theology looking at some of the big questions around how we think about God and who Jesus really was'. A new Interfaith Forum in town is a second outlet for people who want to think outside the traditional Christian box. The challenge of making PCN more widely known when we fill each of our sitting rooms remains a challenge.

## NE Lincolnshire

John Sharp

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We meet on the first Sat morning each month at the Oasis Academy, Grimsby. We have a programme in which we are looking at Christian practice, including Prayer, Contemplation and Meditation. We aim to keep in touch also with the national programme, including what is discussed at the AGM and the June conference on religious faith, atheism and spirituality. We will be seeking to reach out to other groups, including the local Society of Friends and a non-Christian group, possibly keeping up our already established connection with local Muslims. We try to preserve time for members to explore, with the support of others, their own spiritual insights, doubts, hopes and fears.

## Newbury

Maria Grace

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We have steady numbers on the last Fri morning each month for a varied programme interspersing study of Marcus Borg's "Speaking Christian" with more individual contributions, helpful as we learn more about each other. One initiative is to begin each session with a short look at one of the eight points. We are taking it in turns to give a personal view on the allocated point in a way that helps us to absorb them; quiet reflection follows before we start on the main topic. It's early days, but one slightly irreverent thought is to be grateful that 8 points is a lot less than 39 Articles – clearly progression!

## Newcastle

Pat Fuller

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Presaging Fairtrade Fortnight, we will meet Jenny Medhurst in Feb, who has been involved for many years and runs a shop selling ethically traded goods. She will share her experience of ethical trade and thoughts on how it affects the economics and life of poorer nations. In Mar we will host PCN trustee Richard Tetlow, who will address an open audience. His recent book 'Perceptions of Christianity' explores how other people see us. He sees mutual, loving relationships as a priority for human well-being in our British multi-faith society, showing how Christians can listen to - and learn from - others for common benefit. He asks questions in search of meaning, sincere faith and honest personal experience (both religious and non-religious), he seeks recognition of the unity and diversity of all life and suggests ways forward. In the past, such events have drawn in new members and some welcome attention. Fingers crossed for 2019!

## Rugby

Nicola Phelan

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In Jan we shared insights from conversations. We learnt of common ground at a retreat focussing on nature and whispered conversations between patients on a Hospital ward. Both cultural and religious backgrounds varied but a common bond developed. Hilary Bond (PV27 p.10) had been helpful on the difference between discussion, debate and deliberation where perhaps it is intended a conclusion will be reached, and dialogue where we may feel comfortable to acknowledge difference. One person shared how despite complete difference at a political level there was still respect and friendship with a neighbour. In contrast when views are put forward in a way that assumes or demands a response, it can be difficult to know whether to challenge or remain silent. We heard how challenge had been possible and felt to be important, and how agreeing to disagree was the way forward in another. In both the social gathering continued and familial ties and friendships were maintained. Bereavement and last conversations was also mentioned and how we can never fully know everything about each other. We also learnt how books and radio bring their own comfort when

illness and recuperation bring isolation. A new baby led to many conversations and reflected the joy of one family. Being asked 'What is God?' and being made aware that many around the world are not being able to talk about 'God' arose from conversations with a grandchild and a stranger. Our dialogue has given us ideas for future meetings.

**N Staffordshire** Nigel Jones  
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Autumn began with a discussion on Education; I outlined personal views along the line that education should focus on the development of each human being, allowing nonconformity as opposed to expecting people to go through a learning machine in which examination results are the main aim. It also means spiritual development, including creativity, the emotions and the meaning and purpose of life. Then Paul Newman, who recently joined us, gave a very good talk about the place of revelations or spiritual experiences, through which people can 'know' God. This is in line with science and enables people to find faith which is not narrowly based on dogmas and doctrines of religious belief systems. I led a session about the poet and priest R. S. Thomas, based on an excellent book by John G McEllhenney entitled "A masterwork of doubting-belief". It can best be summarised with hyphenations: presence-absence (of God), cognition-emotion (personal faith) and doubting-belief. The most significant message is that he accepted doubts as essential for having the right kind of faith. In Dec, David Watkin, who has also recently joined us, gave a speedy detailed summary of the life and work of Karl Barth; there were indications we would disagree with Barth on a number of issues but David emphasised his strong views on social justice and peace.

**Stirling (Forth Valley)** Jon Cape  
07577 564092 jon.cape@pcnbritain.org.uk

We meet monthly on a weekday evening, but vary the night so that no one with regular commitments is excluded, in the home of a member and have an average of ten. Each meeting is stand-alone using a variety of media and methods – books, films, podcasts and home-grown discussions. In Jan we shared thoughts on "spiritual elevator pitches" – trying to summarise progressive faith in the time it takes a lift to ascend a few floors. In Feb a member will review "The Book of Joy" – conversations between the Dalai Lama

and Desmond Tutu – and lead a discussion of the themes. In Mar we plan to listen to the podcast "Cut Off From the Mainland" an event put on by our friends at Cairns Church, Milngavie.

**N Worcester** David Tubb  
01562 884344 david.tubb@pcnbritain.org.uk

At our last meeting 11 of us watched the first episode of the "Painting the Stars" DVD, on the matter of evolution and its implications for faith. The frequent changes of face and different angles on a complex subject, as well as striking visuals, were not always conducive to concentrating. We were naturally on-side with evolution, though the implications for faith can still surprise, particularly for one's understanding of how God copes as it were with evolution on the move (given what we are told about God). We did have an interesting discussion, trying to work out how God can be absolute, necessary, unchanging, all-knowing yet deal with the "contingent actuality" of changing events. We touched on process theology and such ideas as "the lure of love", but we settled for the comfort of seeing it all as one of life's mysteries! We persevere.

**West Yorkshire** Michael Burn  
michael.burn@pcnbritain.org.uk

At the last meeting of 2018 we discussed John Shelby Spong's "Unbelievable". We considered his claim that "truth is suppressed in the name of unity" (p.7) as the Church continues to parrot old slogans and marginalise those who ask searching questions. While we found little to upset us in Spong's Twelve Theses we thought that the book was rather short on suggestions for the way ahead. On 11 Jan when we discussed thoughts, resources and experiences relating to the Hebrew Scriptures. Members spoke about John Rogerson's "A Theology of the Old Testament", "Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality" by Richard Rohr, Regina Schwartz's "The Curse of Cain: the Violent Legacy of Monotheism" and "Courage To Doubt" by Robert Davidson. At the time of writing we are looking forward to our next meeting on 11 Mar when Peter Shepherd will speak about his book "Questioning the Incarnation" which received rather less than fulsome praise in a Church Times review. Consideration of Jonathan Clatworthy's "Why Progressives Need God" has been put back again. This will now take place at the meeting to be held on 13 May.

## Prof. John F Haught

Georgetown University, USA

### Inside our Awakening Universe: The New Cosmic Story and the Meaning of Faith

Winchester

Wed 29 May, 7 pm

[joanna.wilson@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:joanna.wilson@winchester.ac.uk)

St James' Church, Piccadilly,  
London

### Christian Faith and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe

Sun 2 June, 1.50 pm

[www.livingspirit.org.uk/events](http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/events)  
[petragriffiths@livingspirit.org.uk](mailto:petragriffiths@livingspirit.org.uk)

## Life, Death and Everything

### Free to Believe

Mon 9 Sept - Thurs 12 Sept

Bishop Woodford House, Ely  
Reading party: **Richard Holloway**,  
Waiting for the Last Bus  
and **Dale Allison**, Night comes  
£255 ensuite £235 non-ensuite  
Martin Camroux, 4 Sorrel Close,  
Colchester, CO45UJ  
Deposit of £50, cheques made out  
to Free to Believe

## Flourishing

Human Flourishing on a  
Flourishing Earth.

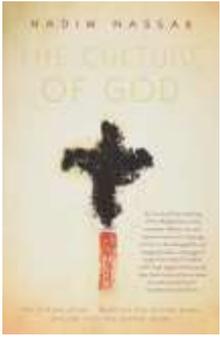
Finding a way together

### Nicola Peel

Brighton, Brighton BN1 1YD  
**Sat 8 June 2019, 10am – 4.45 pm**  
[www.livingspirit.org.uk/brighton](http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/brighton)  
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# Reviews

## The Culture of God by Nadim Nassar, Hodder & Stoughton



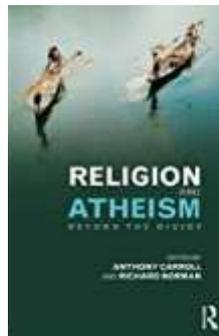
Nadim is an Anglican priest, born in the Syrian port of Lattakia. He studied theology during the civil war in Beirut. He has experienced the horrors of civil wars in Syria and Iraq “which

allowed (him) to witness the depths of cruelty that humans can inflict on one another”. This resulted in his co-founding the Awareness Foundation, an ecumenical charity which seeks to empower people to embrace diversity and build peaceful communities especially in the Middle East. Nadim explores what he describes as the culture of God. Just as our own culture is the result of interaction of peoples, so the culture of God is to be found in the interaction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit which we can glimpse “through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ”. His exploration of this culture begins with outlining the earthly culture of the time that Jesus lived on earth and how Jesus linked this with the culture of God. He continues by considering Jesus’ life and teaching, his relationship with those around him and the crucifixion and resurrection to show how these illustrate the culture of God. For example, he uses Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman to show that the culture of God is a culture of love in which there is no place for religious or racial prejudice. However, what sets this book apart is that, as a person born and brought up in the Levant, he draws upon his background and, with anecdotes from his past, offers a different perspective on the world into which Jesus was born and lived all his earthly life. Thus, when considering Jesus’ use of storytelling in his teaching, Nadim tells us of the central position of the storyteller in the life of the people of the Levant and of a storyteller to whom he listened as a child. He provides a new perspective on the Bread of Life by describing the reverence accorded to bread in everyday life in the Levant where any left after one meal is saved for the next and, if any falls to the ground in the

street, it is moved to the side so that no one steps upon it. He adds a personal twist to the story of Mary and Martha by recalling his family home when his mother would disappear into the kitchen to prepare his favourite dishes despite his wish for her to sit and talk to him. These are some of the interesting nuggets to be found in this book which adds something rather special to it. For all his adult life, his homeland of the Levant has been racked by war and civil conflict. The Christians, who have been in that region for nearly 2000 years, are going through one of their darkest times and real fear of their extinction is being expressed. Despite this background, he remains optimistic and hopeful that “whatever our race, our culture and our religion may be...the culture of God, the heart of God, is the ultimate space for humanity to fulfil its potential and the purpose of its creation”.

Nigel Bastin

## Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide edited by Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman, Routledge



There is no doubt that this book comprehensively explores the differences and similarities between people with religious beliefs and those without. It does not seek to

emphasise one system over another, but it does, in its various essays, enter in ethical and moral theories to illustrate the similarities and differences in the beliefs of theists and atheists. I am writing this as a Humanist and can identify with many of the arguments and find some of the hypotheses very interesting; for example, the idea that some people are “hardwired” to accept religion whilst others are not, I find difficult to agree with; however I would accept that people have certain experiences which lead them to turn to religion or not. It is interesting that in the book the only contribution that gives facts (if you are prepared to believe them) and figures for the numbers of people practising religion and gives many survey results reflecting attitudes to religion, is written by The Chief Executive of Humanists UK.

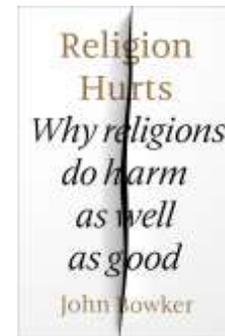
This is more of an empirical view than a philosophical standpoint.

The strength of this book is that it does not proselytise or prioritise any view over another. It is a balanced debate giving equal value to both sides of the argument.

I see it as an excellent textbook for both theology and philosophy students. It is not a particularly easy read for the lay person. Having said that, if one was prepared to read it over a period of time and perhaps take certain chapters as a basis for debate between friends and colleagues, it could be inspirational. I would certainly recommend this book to anyone with an open mind who wanted to explore their world view.

Pete Bispham

## Religion Hurts by John Bowker, SPCK



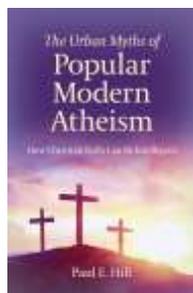
John Bowker is Emeritus Professor at Gresham College, London and author of more than forty books, including ‘Why Religions Matter’ (CUP 2015). The author describes this as a

short book, written to answer the questions ‘Why are there different religions?’ and ‘Do the differences make a difference?’ But the reader should be under no illusion that this is a short and easy read. In fact, over the book’s 191 pages the author draws together philosophy, theology, religious studies and the latest neuroscience into a synthesis which operates at a highly academic level. Bowker does not shy away from describing some fundamental divisions amongst Muslims concerning the place of violence and indeed differences within all religions as he examines in some detail how our genetic make-up as human beings means that rational evaluation is combined with emotion in such profound ways that many different outcomes become possible and are a reality, not least in regard to religion. But the author admires the contributions of religions to human life and in the last, and most accessible chapter, seeks to ask if religions and religious people can transcend the boundaries of their own religion to discover how together they may demonstrate the meanings of love.

In 2006 Keith Ward, whilst Professor of Divinity at Gresham College, also addressed this subject in a book entitled 'Is Religion Dangerous?' I found that book far more accessible and helpful on this important topic.

**Adrian Alker**

**The Urban Myths of Popular Modern Atheism by Paul E. Hill, Christian Alternative**

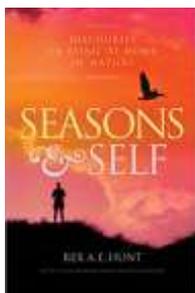


Hmmm, good question... According to Marie Kondo, we should be hanging on to a maximum of 30 books. So, what can this book possibly offer to offset having shelf space left for only 29?

Well for a start, it's useful. Hill sets up a series of standard atheist objections ('Religion-Causes-War,' and 'There-Are-Plenty-of-Good-People-Who-Aren't-Even-Christians') and then wallops them hard with his philosophically-refined theology/theologically-refined philosophy. His vigour and precision are wonderfully pleasing to read. Hill's reach is broad and his targets are many. Richard Dawkins and his ilk come in for a lot of stick as modern-day 'cultured despisers of religion' whose reasoning is flawed. Throughout, Hill deplores the crass and lazy 'Christian' theologies that only provoke and encourage misunderstandings. Christians, he says, are their own worst enemy. Instead, Hill urges a better theological understanding. As well as being useful, this book is funny. Hill has a keen sense of the ridiculous. Referring to Specsavers, Youtube, Judge Judy and the Department of Work and Pensions, he highlights the contrasts and continuities that affect our 2,000-year old relationship with Christ. Deeply inflected by David Bentley Hart's concern with apocatastasis - that is, that we will all of us in the end be reconciled with God - Hill argues passionately that postmodern fudginess does nobody any favours. Least of all the exasperating Scriptural literalists who deny a rich tradition of Christian analysis. Hill defends strict methodological discipline in the pursuit of doctrine and dogma but insists on the vital, human importance of applying and accepting widely different interpretations. Ok, nice one, 29 books left. Tolstoy, anybody?

**Hellen Giblin-Jowett**

**Seasons and Self by Rex Hunt, Coventry Press**



For those of us who have thrived in our worship leading on the back of his online sermons and liturgies, this is another splendid resource looking closely at ecological theology and

religious naturalism. For me, the online material has been resource overload. Taking many hours to find just the right phrase or liturgical insight that will take the congregation into a deeper understanding and experience of that which Hunt refers to as 'G-o-d'. This is a book of sermons, insights, poetry and good clear references to some 200 publications in his combined bibliography – an amazing resource. This book will doubtless be criticised for yet again going beyond the creeds and established doctrines of the Church. Others will probably be equally as critical that Hunt is not jettisoning the primitive spiritual quest and going whole heartedly into rational scientific developments. However, Hunt is clear that progressives need to explore and to extend the work beyond conventional theology into an exploration of natural theology that is relevant for our time. A number of the themes are accompanied by John Cranmer's thought provoking poetry. Throughout the book there are gems of quotes and insights. "Seasons and Self" is a wonderful resource, and not just for the preachers and worship leaders. It is a challenging, thought provoking book for all spiritually progressive thinkers. It could be excellent group study material. Above all it is an exciting, warmly reassuring exploration of a spirituality that is not new but one that is becoming better known among the open, progressive thinkers within and beyond the Church. It is highly recommended.

**John Churcher**

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**Invitation**

Please reflect on these and submit brief (1 or 2 sentence) responses on what they mean to you, and/or how you live them out.

[dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)



**Eight Points**

PCN Britain offers these eight points, not as a creed, but as an expression of the Christian life.

We are people who

1. Seek God, however understood, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus
2. Affirm that there are many ways to experience the Sacred and that we can draw on diverse sources of wisdom on our spiritual journeys.
3. Recognise that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and to confront evil.
4. Place hospitality at the centre of our communal and worshipping life and see the sharing of bread and wine as an expression of our common humanity.
5. Seek to build communities that accept all who wish to share companionship without insisting on conformity.
6. Know that the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of our faith.
7. Gain more insights in the search for understanding than we do in certainty.
8. Work together within and beyond the Church to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

# Ingredients for conversations

I'm hungry for conversations about faith: for conversations that touch depths and open up vistas, not those that box in, tidy up or close down.

I know other people feel this hunger. Organising a series of conversation evenings for my Quaker Meeting I was surprised how easy it was to find volunteers to introduce an evening on 'who or what is God for you?'

Peer-to-peer sharing of where we've found meaning in life - and of our raw edges of unknowing - forges deep connections. Even if there's no natural affinity between perspectives, hearing and being heard can still foster understanding and respect. One friend described such conversations as the lifeblood of our faith community.

But I find that conversations like this rarely happen spontaneously. The same people gather companionably over tea and coffee after Sunday worship, but that's not usually the moment to strike out into the depths.

So, what makes for a good conversation about faith? In many ways it depends on the circumstances but for me hospitable listening will always be an essential ingredient. What we can say, how we can be, depends in part upon how we are listened to. What I can say in private conversation with a trusted friend is different to what I might say if I was being interviewed by a scrutinizing journalist live on TV.

Taking this a step further we realise that listening can be a creative, life-giving act. The feminist theologian Nelle Morton coined the phrase 'hearing into speech' to describe women's experience in consciousness-raising groups of how being deeply listened to enabled them to claim and inhabit their identity. I recognize this in conversations where I come away uplifted, affirmed by my conversation partner's listening.

[A brief theological aside: Morton and others also suggested that hearing into speech is a role God plays. I love the idea of God creating by listening, hearing us into fullness of life. In this way, when we listen deeply and hospitably to each other, we are joining in with the God who is always already listening.]

Other ingredients for conversations I often find helpful are clear intentions and a little bit of structure. The conversation evening on 'who or what is God for you?' I mentioned earlier is a good example of this. We gathered with the clear intentions of exploring our spiritual journeys and getting to know each other. Introductory speakers and an agreement to speak from our own experience, without commenting on other people's contributions, all grounded by times of quiet provided an unobtrusive structure. As someone who doesn't find it easy to talk about my faith, this gives me both an invitation and reassurance about the nature of the conversation. I know we are seeking together, not engaging in a point scoring debate.



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When I'm looking for a way to start a group conversation, I reach for an open question inviting reflection on personal experience. Here are some questions I've used:

- Where are your roots?
- What feeds your soul?
- Who is your neighbour?
- What makes your spirit fly?
- How do you want to change the world?

What would your recipe for a good conversation about faith be?



**Katie Evans** is a Quaker interested in spirituality and listening.  
<https://katie.element42.org>

## Radical Faith



The revamped 2018 Free to Believe National Conference on 'Radical Faith' came up trumps with enthralling speakers and a resulting general agreement that this was one of the best ever.

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