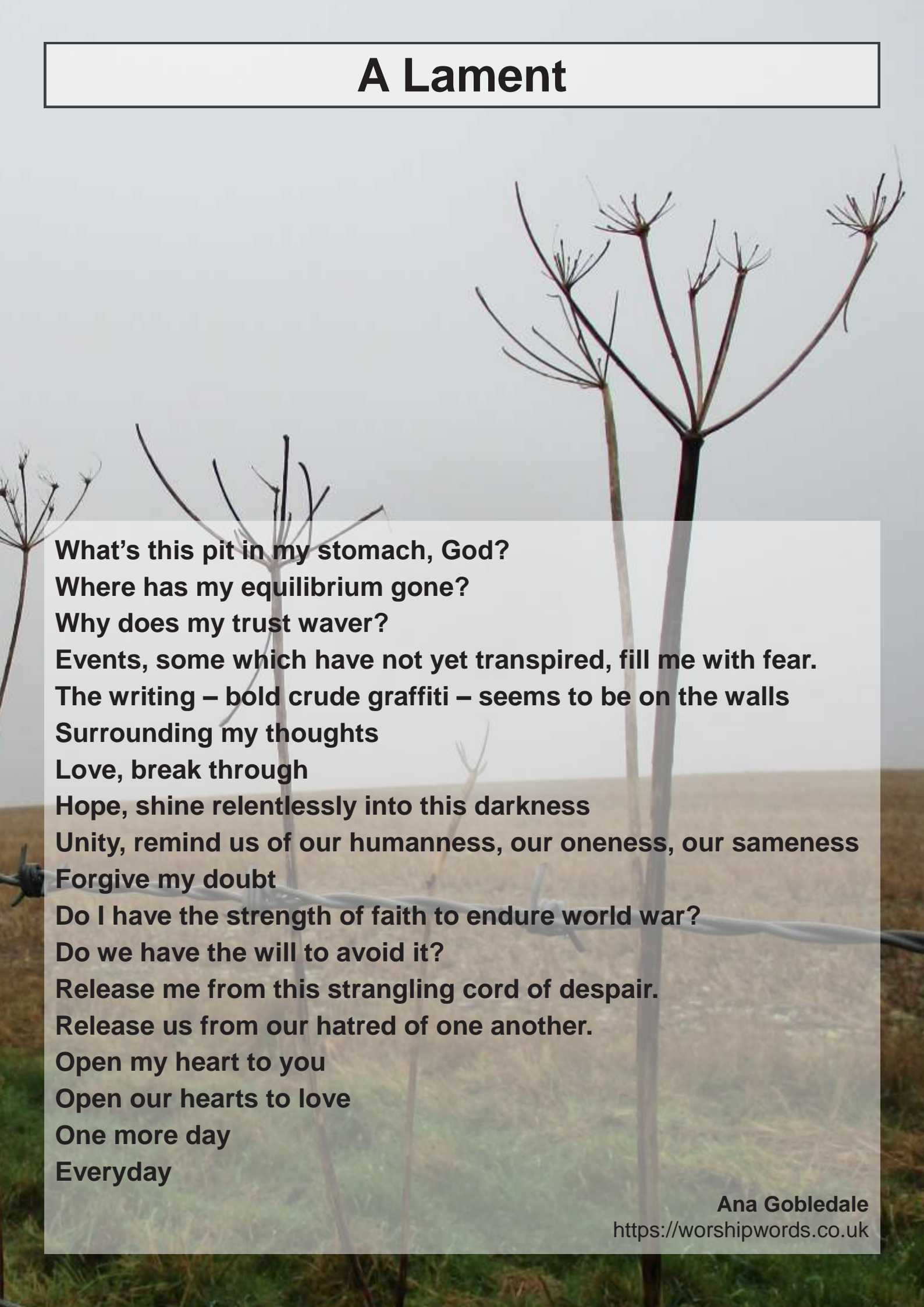




progressive

Voices 51

# A Lament



**What's this pit in my stomach, God?  
Where has my equilibrium gone?  
Why does my trust waver?  
Events, some which have not yet transpired, fill me with fear.  
The writing – bold crude graffiti – seems to be on the walls  
Surrounding my thoughts  
Love, break through  
Hope, shine relentlessly into this darkness  
Unity, remind us of our humanness, our oneness, our sameness  
Forgive my doubt  
Do I have the strength of faith to endure world war?  
Do we have the will to avoid it?  
Release me from this strangling cord of despair.  
Release us from our hatred of one another.  
Open my heart to you  
Open our hearts to love  
One more day  
Everyday**



# Contents

- 2 Poem: A Lament
- 3 Welcome; Membership; Staff & Trustees
- 4 Chair's Letter; St. Francis to the Rescue?
- 5 Greenbelt Virgin
- 6 Enabling evolving faith
- 7 Beyond Galilee
- 8 Group Reflections
- 10 Inconsistency?
- 12 Overstories and magical thinking
- 14 Whisper Ethics
- 16 Fairtrade
- 17 Hymn: Choose Fairtrade; How did it start?
- 18 News from local groups; Letters
- 19 The Nativity Story in Context
- 20 Reviews: On Reflection, Thinking about Religion in the 21st Century, Transcendental Spirituality, Wisdom and Virtue, Practicing the Way, God's Calling in Poetry, Cultural Hermeneutics, The Eclipse of Christianity, Playing God, Generous Faith, Queer Redemption, Our Eternal Existence
- 23 Treasurer; Norwich; PCN Britain's 2025 Annual General Meeting
- 24 Made of Stories

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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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# Welcome

In this edition we offer a variety of perspectives: pilgrims to Italy and Greenbelt, the end of a group and the beginning of another, feedback from an MA dissertation, reflections on reading and writing books and reminders of the importance of Fairtrade and the complexities behind the Nativity story.

We also have a bumper supply of reviews and three folk who got in touch to agree with me!

Welcome to the 51st edition of PV.

Enjoy!

*Dave Coaker*



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# Chair's Letter

Dear friends,

In this issue of Progressive Voices I have eschewed my usual practice of interviewing a progressive voice, and offered some thoughts of my own for your consideration. Well, I say thoughts of my own, but really they are the thoughts of other people – chewed up and regurgitated for you to consider. I hope that you will find them interesting at least, and perhaps you'll even track down the books they are based on and come up with your own thoughts and reflections.

Since moving house in the summer, I've had to reckon with my book collection – I have, by any estimation, too many. If it makes it any better, I can say that many of them are, at least, second hand. I do keep picking up new books too, though, particularly when they are by writers whom I respect or admire.

Among the books I've read recently is David Robson's 'The Laws of Connection'. Robson is a 'popular science' writer, and a great communicator. In this new book he explains how important strong social bonds are – they don't just help us mentally and emotionally; they are also important physically. Wounds heal faster and infections clear up more rapidly when we have good social connections.

But it is, perhaps, mental health that is the topic of the moment. It has gone from being something which seemed relatively taboo to being something openly, if inexpertly, discussed in the street. "Have you got mental health? Because I have," someone said to me once. I really wasn't sure how to answer.

## St. Francis to the Rescue?

This was my first thought on reading an advert for a pilgrimage to sites around Lake Maggiore.

A few months later and with other group members I learnt about the 9 Sacri Monti of Northern Italy (XVI-XVIII) making up a UNESCO world heritage site. Beautifully kept, peaceful chapels set within natural settings for contemplation. The Varolla site consists of 45 chapels each containing life-size wooden or alabaster theatrical figures depicting the life of Christ. In contrast, Sacro Monte di Orta is dedicated to St Francis. Sacro Monte were in part constructed to counter the effects of Luther's Reformation. The Vatican was so disturbed by progress of the Reformation that they modelled Sacro Monte di Orta as the second coming of Christ, including St Francis



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One of the things that Robson highlights is the way that conversations where people try, together, to puzzle through some of the difficulties of life, what he calls 'co-reflection' are associated with better mental health. Co-reflection, he says, doesn't need to be unnecessarily positive, we can still acknowledge the real difficulties we face. It is the process of the co-reflective conversation which is important.

This made me think of the value of our PCN groups. When I first joined a group, it helped me do precisely this: discuss, honestly, the questions that I was grappling with. Questions about God, about the Church, about religion more broadly. It was not the only place I was able to get into co-reflection, but it was a really important one.

Those of us who are part of groups which meet, however regularly or irregularly, to talk about the issues that concern, confuse, or confound us are doing a great service to those with whom they co-reflect. Those who convene and organise the groups are doing great work for their communities – I know that at times it may feel burdensome or challenging, but what you are doing is a genuine service.

According to David Robson, co-reflection really does help us all to deal with the challenges that we face. Although he doesn't say so, I know this to be true of the challenges we face when thinking about our religion, faith, beliefs, or lack thereof. To all who serve others by organising or entering into those co-reflective conversations as part of PCN: thank you.



born in a manger! As little is said of this today, the threat represented by Luther must have passed by. However, it does demonstrate the lengths to which a religious group will go to, to protect its status.

**Robert Williams**

# Greenbelt Virgin

Good! Now I have your attention I'd like to share with you a little about this year's wonderful Greenbelt Festival.

But first, a little background, especially for all you other Greenbelt virgins...

Just over 50 years ago James Holloway (bricklayer and theologian), shared his dream with Jim Palosaari, an American evangelist and performer and one of the leaders in the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Jim's response was, "If you've got a field, you've got a festival." And so, we are told, "from these naïve beginnings, the 'toddler' Greenbelt began to stumble forward, growing fast, learning fast, but also making mistakes and throwing the occasional tantrum!"

On their website we're told that it was founded "by a bunch of misfits in a field". It's still in a field (or to be precise lots of fields) and it's still an event that welcomes absolutely anyone and everyone - especially those who often feel like they don't belong anywhere else. But although none of us is a perfect fit, it's simply not acceptable to regard anyone as a 'misfit'. For whatever reason, if a person is ever deemed not to 'fit in' then it seems to me that the fault lies with those who are shameful, prejudiced or cruel enough to give other people that unkind misnomer - or even worse exclude them. That's definitely something Greenbelt doesn't do. It's so refreshing and a real joy to be in such a beautifully inclusive environment.

Yes, I was a Greenbelt virgin but I reckon it's never too late, and I can honestly say that losing that virginity was a wonderful experience!

It was an immersive, stimulating experience alongside over 10,000 other (mostly seasoned) festival merry-makers - intrepid and undeterred by the initial blusterous challenges of Storm Lillian on the Friday followed by a very wet and soggy Saturday. But Alleluia! the sun shone brightly on Sunday as the thousands gathered in Communion to share bread just as the five (or four?) thousand did by the Sea of Galilee. What an experience! - even for grumpy old me who decided to listen and observe quietly and reflectively from the edge.

It soon became clear that Greenbelt is very much about focussing on the serious matters confronting our world today and challenging us to face them head on with courage, compassion and caritas.

This year, quite rightly, there was much emphasis on the Israel/Palestine conflict, on Ukraine, on environmental issues, on what I shall call the fragile state of the Church and on gender identity and sexuality. The festival was served with many



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excellent speakers and great music for the young rappers and the old rockers like me. And the special area for activities and entertainment for children was brilliant and great fun - and not just for the kids but also for those adults who want to get in touch with their inner child - highly recommended of course by Jesus. (I was mesmerised by the magician's incredible tricks!)

I was surprised but delighted that Greenbelt is in partnership with a huge variety of organisations; among them are the Iona Community, the Trussell Trust, Embrace the Middle East, the Amos Trust, the Arts Council England, the Methodist Church, the URC, Refugees at Home and Citizens UK.

The Student Christian Movement was well-represented and one of them has said that Greenbelt was "one of the only spaces where I felt fully myself, where everyone is wonderfully different, but also really 'gets it.'" And as the Greenbelt website says in its beautifully all-embracing manifesto, the ethos of the festival is "fuelled by a uniquely progressive spiritual vision".

It was great to see a significant PCN presence providing a cheery welcome and various edifying freebies. Our heartfelt appreciation must go to Sarah, our dedicated administrator, for holding the fort so generously.

As someone who has largely given up on traditional church, the Greenbelt experience gave me so much hope for the future of intelligent, inclusive and compassionate Christianity. It spoke of the real Jesus of the Gospels whilst largely jettisoning the Jesus of our religious institutions. It spoke of God's unconditional love rather than condemnation. It reminded me of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's 'Rainbow People of God' and it was a living 21st century expression of words recorded by the early Church father, Tertullian - "See how they (these Christians) love one another!" If only the spirit of Greenbelt could infuse all our churches - especially those that don't like the 'misfits'!

If you've managed to get here and are a Greenbelt virgin, then I would thoroughly recommend it as an experience not to be missed. In many ways it was a surprise and a bit of an eye-opener for a rather boring, set-in-their-ways old codger like me, but hey, even at 70 there's still a lot to learn and new experiences to discover. So live adventurously as our Quaker friends say, and enjoy and celebrate things that take you closer to the edge?

I hope to see you there next year! And if you're not quite up to the physical demands of camping I can recommend a brilliant pub.



## Enabling evolving faith

## Supporting women's journey through faith deconstruction

For many Christians there comes a time when their faith evolves. It may look like old truths being reconsidered, changing understandings of God, seeking spiritual fulfilment and so on. Whilst this process can be difficult, it seems that it is a natural part of faith development although not everyone agrees or wants to travel far on the road. Common among the many proposed patterns of faith development is a stage of discomfort and questioning. A current trend is to call this faith deconstruction, 'the process of re-evaluating, changing, and sometimes abandoning one's beliefs' (Roberts 2023).

The drop in church attendance seems to be mirrored by rises in people identifying as ‘spiritual but not religious’ (SBNR) (Curtice et al 2019). A Theos report explored the beliefs of ‘the nones’, those who report having no religion. It showed that 61% of those claiming to be ‘spiritual’ were women (Waite 2022). Hidden in these statistics are the women who are leaving church and seeking spiritual support elsewhere. Research, biographies, personal encounters and experience show that this can be a painful and lonely time. So, what supports women through this process?

I interviewed 7 women, aged between 35 to 90 years, who identified with the experience of Christian faith deconstruction, and asked what supported them through that experience. All had started off in church, most in leadership roles and some were still there. Others had left church altogether but continued to pursue Christian faith in



**Meryl White** is a non-stipendiary URC minister and did this research as part of her MA in Theology.

alternative settings, often describing their faith as stronger and richer than ever. Some looked for spiritual sustenance in other practices and traditions. (Names changed to maintain anonymity.)

They were asked two main questions, 'Can you describe your journey of faith deconstruction?' and 'What, if anything, supported you on this journey?' Using thematic analysis, five main themes emerged: Questions, Trauma, Self-Identity, Companionship and Liberation.

Each woman described having questions which they were not able to address in the church setting. Some described being silenced and disregarded when their questions challenged the status quo.

Nancy: 'Even at Alpha courses questions came up, even as a facilitator, we were closed down, almost intimidated. How dare we ask that question?'

Others had big questions about what they experienced in church such as spiritual abuse, patriarchy and misogyny.

Lucy: 'I just don't accept it; I don't accept that that is an OK way to treat anybody let alone someone who is struggling with [their] mental health'.

Questions and trauma seemed to go hand in hand. Women needed their trauma to be recognised, valuing support to face it and seek healing.

Clare: ‘...and I stayed with the chapel just because they were so kind and supportive.’

Women expressed a developing sense of self-identity, finding the freedom to be their authentic selves and no longer needing to conform to church expectations. They were free to ask questions, discuss faith issues openly and experience spirituality in new ways.

Nancy: '... I learned so much about myself ... I think personal development, self-awareness, is a great part of spirituality.'

Louise: '...its simply being who we are individually and together and encouraging each other.'

What was really important for the women was companionship and acceptance.

Nancy: ‘... it was the connection that mattered to me, connecting with each other.’

Some quoted Rogers' ideal of 'unconditional positive regard' as being important for the way they were accepted and how they wanted to be able to accept others (Rogers 1957). This had not been most women's experience in church. They reported that acceptance of themselves, and others, was conditional on believing and conforming to what that church saw as 'the right thing'.

Kate: 'I wanted to love everybody ... but the Bible,

as it was presented to me, forced me to judge people and exclude people and that's not what it's all about.'

For all of the women the journey of faith deconstruction led to a sense of liberation. Being liberated from what they had been taught to believe was orthodox belief gave them freedom to see God in new ways, explore alternative worship, have confidence to let go of past beliefs and forge a new path of faith for themselves. All of them agreed that the journey of faith deconstruction was liberating, spiritually fulfilling and ongoing.

Kate: 'Once you've got over the stage of, "Oh my goodness my faith is in pieces" it's really liberating.'

Hannah: 'so I think I'm still muddled, still questioning but much happier where I am in my faith.'

Drawing on women's lived experience I concluded that women are supported through faith deconstruction when: their questions are heard, explored and new possibilities discovered; their trauma and pain are recognised and they are supported through the difficulties and enabled to grow; they engage in personal, spiritual development and are enabled to be their authentic selves; they find an accepting community making connection the divine, creation and others; they reject oppressive systems, claim their own agency and live into their liberation.

Louise: 'Maybe the Jesus I believe in is my Saviour, in the sense that, finally I encountered a being, a way, that made sense to me ... it was about "I love you", "I accept you", "I am for you".'

As a Christian minister it was hard to hear of the pain caused by church and that some women needed to leave church for their faith to evolve and develop. They have shared what enabled their spiritual development and wanted their voices to be heard. If churches and faith communities are to be places of evolving faith they need to listen and perhaps they need to evolve too.

Sophia: '... it's a gift, to have ears and eyes that actually challenge my preconceptions of things ...'

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## Beyond Galilee

When Tim Yeager went into hospital for cancer treatment earlier this year Robin Drummond, Jim Corrigan and I undertook to keep the monthly Zoom meetings of the Galilee Group running in his absence. Sadly, that absence quickly became permanent with Tim's death on 2nd April.

With the help of friends within PCN we were able to find speakers to fill the programme until we took a break for the summer, but the question became "What next?" Tim had such a wide network of contacts and potential speakers to draw on that neither Robin, Jim or I felt equal to the task of sustaining the programme Tim had developed.

Galilee Group members were consulted about what to do next. Some felt that we had reached a natural ending, whilst others wanted to continue the fellowship without necessarily following the meeting format which Tim had established.

So in consultation with PCN Chair, Simon Cross, we have taken some time to reflect on our next steps, the upshot of which is that we will begin a new online group (*New Treasures*) in January.

We felt it appropriate to follow the meeting pattern of the former Galilee Group, so we will continue on the second Sunday each month, gathering at 8pm.

The aim of *New Treasures* is to provide space for group-led exploration of questions of Christian faith with heart as well as mind. *New Treasures* is open to all with the hope that it will provide a natural home for those wishing to follow up themes arising from past and any future Galilee Courses as well as from other sources (books, writings, films, art, etc).

Jim having decided he needed to step back from close involvement, Robin and I are delighted to have been joined by Christine Brown and Sally Hyder to help organize and run the group.

Please get in touch at [mike.evans1904@gmail.com](mailto:mike.evans1904@gmail.com) if you would like to journey with us and we will send you the Zoom link.

**Mike Evans**

### New Treasures

Beginning Sunday 12th January 2025

8pm via Zoom

A look at two paintings from The Methodist Collection of Modern Art

# Group Reflections

The Woking Group decided over the summer to end regular meetings for the time being. It was formed about 20 years ago by several people who wanted to understand the biblical and theological advances of recent years. Woking's Trinity Methodist Church initially hosted meetings, but quickly a second house group was set up. Starting with the Living the Questions videos, we moved on to other PCN resource material. After about 10 years it was decided to merge into one with increased reliance on written material from authors such as Brian McLaren, Richard Holloway and Don MacGregor, together with feedback from progressive webinars. Covid, together with several participants now living outside the area, shifted meetings to Zoom. This also allowed the occasional contribution from people from other faiths or interests.

Participants came to the group with differing backgrounds. Although the original members were predominantly Methodist / URC, over the years it attracted a wider range of denominations from Quaker to RC as well as the non-aligned. From the start the more repressive aspects of the dominant local conservative churches meant that people who found it difficult to agree to Biblical-literal theology were seeking something more fulfilling. The group I was in contained several people who were clearly traumatised by what they had been told in church, particularly the prominent place of Hell (especially for gays), patriarchy and restrictive gender roles underpinned by selective biblical quotations. My background, growing up in a progressive Anglican environment in church, at school and university, enabled me to see that this was far from the only story, but others were seeking an alternative to these restrictive beliefs.

We found the Living the Questions material and related DVDs loaned by PCN both stimulating and informative and were blessed with good leaders. We understood that the more we knew, the more we realised we did not know. As perhaps the wisest and oldest member of the group has said recently, the more we know, the more we want to find out. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of each "phase" of the group several people returned to their home churches with a desire to serve the local community in a Christian context but had less enthusiasm for the churches themselves. A few others found that they could not reconcile what they had learned at the sessions with the prevailing ethos of the local churches at all. Many churches appear to require submission to set dogmas and structures as a route to "salvation", but even in more liberal churches the prevailing authorised liturgies and creeds can be off



**John Hack** is/was a member of the Woking PCN group.

-putting.

Linda Woodhead has articulated national attitudes to Christianity and gave PCN a highly informative webinar, so it is unnecessary to dwell on the parlous state of institutional Christianity in the context of both aging congregations and less general knowledge about Christianity itself. It sometimes seems that all religions are viewed as instruments of oppression, ranging from wars and genocides that seem to pit one national-religious group against another, to the discovery of abuse that has occurred in specifically religious contexts. I have been lucky in that in an area generally hostile to progressive religious views I have found clergy who have been prepared to discuss progressive ideas in small groups, if not in general worship and preaching.

Given the prospect of a rather grim future, can progressives make the case for a set of rational religious beliefs, bringing together Scripture, Reason and Tradition to the service of the community and offer people an experience / knowledge of the divine? – in the words of John Shelby Spong: 'The task of religion is ... to deepen the personal within us, to enhance the power of life, to expand our consciousness, in order that we might see things that our eyes do not normally see.'

As one group closes, it seems an appropriate moment to draw together some tentative conclusions about growing progressive ideas. The following therefore offers some questions and my observations as one PCN group participant who comes from a (very) Liberal Catholic Anglican background. Perhaps they should be prefaced by the old examination question "...Discuss".

**Put the Bible in context?** A library of books written many years ago, sometimes from a very partisan perspective and in the context of a very different world cannot be expected to have all the answers for today, especially if much depends on past interpretation or the vagaries of translation. If read more like historic literature than as a "holy book" everyone might understand more. It follows that in a church context we should resist the use of responses such as "This is the Word of the Lord" when it is for example rather a doctored history of ancient Israel or a letter by one of the biblical saints to give a specific lesson. Even the Gospels may not accurately report the words of Jesus, conventionally the Word of the Lord. The Bible therefore will contain the Word, but perhaps we should see the Holy Spirit in other revelatory literatures through the ages and take more account of the findings of modern biblical scholars re-examining biblical and other "non-canonical" texts.



**Tradition allows change?** The biblical record itself shows that change is possible. Jesus is sometimes presented as a revolutionary and was probably executed by the Romans with the connivance of the Temple authorities for subversion. Loosening the food laws, challenging the observance of the Sabbath, heightening the status of women and later the abandonment of ritual circumcision all show that ideas must change with the times. A God stuck in the pages of an old book, or who does not continually give us revelations would quickly become irrelevant. Churches are not good at this – for example the messages given out at the very popular Traditional Carol Service (which was actually innovatory when introduced a century ago). “Christian children all should be mild, obedient...” and “not abhor the Virgin’s womb” may be loved hymns, but should be viewed in the light of survey findings that Christianity is popularly regarded as a heritage issue rather than something relevant today.

**Embrace science?** From the three-decker universe to the vastness of myriads of galaxies, from a seven day creation to dinosaurs and the big bang, and from miracle stories to medical discoveries science has brought us to our present state of knowledge and wonder. Interestingly many of the fundamental discoveries of the past came about by scientists searching for the divine. Arabic astronomers and English clergymen geologists are examples. Science is often portrayed as being opposed to religion, but if we take every scientific discovery as revelatory, whether found by someone who is devout or an atheist, then we have a common language to discuss the implications of the discovery on our lives. Sometimes this will challenge established knowledge or prejudices that will lead to difficult moral choices that we need to discuss and pray about. Gender issues are a current example causing disharmony in the Church.

**Be political?** This is controversial. *Faith in the City* was branded as Marxist by Conservative MPs years ago. Today, both the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury have emphasised the need to deal with climate change and Christian charities rail against policies that harm the poor as well as providing practical relief. I have found that many Christians who say the church should keep out of politics seem to align with the views of the political Right! American PCN is actively challenging the distortion of Christianity exhibited by some Republicans and has expressed a real fear for the future if Christian Nationalism becomes part of the establishment there. We can discuss whether the recorded actions of Jesus were “political” but he does seem to have challenged the Romans and the Temple authorities. The Sermon on the Mount seems to be a good definition of the “woke”, which is used as a derogatory term in our culture wars. Should progressives take a more explicit stand?

**Experience transcendence?** I suspect that most people experience feelings that take them out of themselves. This might be art or music, landscape, nature, architecture, the starry sky or intense personal relationships. The works of prehistoric cultures such as Stonehenge or the Stones of Calanais also show how people have always been searching for more than mortality. Such moments seem to linger in the mind throughout life, whilst even non-believers may say they “pray” in extreme situations. We recognise the devotion to service that challenges the strictly utilitarian view of the world. We say that at Iona, the sky is “thinner” and for some of us the Eucharist is the place where we can touch the eternal. Yet most belief is presented as restrictive, liturgy can be off-putting, and Christians are generally seen as out of touch. Brian McLaren charts the retreat from past religion but sees hope and quotes Carl Sagan: ‘A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.’

For many this might be a better way in to experiencing the meaning of Jesus’ ministry and giving life to the expression that we should be a Resurrection people and, in the words of the hymn, show that “we have a gospel to proclaim”.



# Inconsistency?

A question, sometimes posed in debates about the existence, or otherwise, of a creator God, is if God created the Universe, who created God? For me the answer to this question is relatively straightforward - we human beings did. Human beings, I would argue, developed (and are still developing) the languages by means of which they communicate with each other, and "God" is merely a word in one of the many languages human beings have developed. The word is used to communicate various human ideas (seemingly a plethora of ideas at times), at least some of which have been used to construct particular systems of understanding and belief. Much effort is expended in trying to encourage (perhaps even persuade - sometimes forcibly) people to adopt a favoured one of these systems. Thus, different religions have vastly different understandings and beliefs, while still having the word "God" (or a translation thereof) as a focus. Many of those who use the word God give the impression of considering themselves "right" and others "wrong". It is not surprising, therefore, that uncommitted individuals can be heard exclaiming "well, they can't all be right". It is simpler, perhaps, for people to avoid getting involved with religion rather than try to work out which of many disparate groups has the upper hand when it comes to best understanding. Inconsistency between different religions is thus relatively easy to spot but what about inconsistency within individual religions?

Christianity seemingly embraces a wide range of systems of understanding and belief, ranging from staunch fundamentalism, favouring strictly literal interpretation of the Bible, to progressivism / liberalism tolerating critical questioning and broad interpretations. These very different approaches embrace perspectives that are clearly inconsistent, and these inconsistencies may be highly influential in how non-adherents perceive the whole of Christianity. As examples of such inconsistencies, I would cite the very different approaches Christian groups have to the roles of women in church life and whether same sex relationships are valued and accepted. It seems, at times, as if church groups are more concerned about their particular forms of dogma than meeting the spiritual needs of those around them. Should we be surprised if the overall number of people describing themselves as "Christian" is declining (at least in relatively free-thinking parts of the world such as the UK and US)?

Are we sometimes in danger of losing sight of the human subjectivity involved in Christian and other religious understandings? Does the language we use and do some of the tenets we uphold simply



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repel those who may be seeking a deeper meaning to life or just some help in coping with their current life experience?

When we sing about the cruel crucifixion of a human being satisfying the wrath of God, what message is this sending to someone who, almost in the same breath, is being told that "God is love"?

It has been recognised, by at least some Christians, that the Bible is a human product. This is hardly surprising, if one accepts that the writings it contains were produced by human beings, in particular human contexts and circumstances, and written in languages developed by human beings and that it was human beings who selected which writings to include in the Biblical Canon. While some cite "divine inspiration", this too comes down to human ideas, assigned by human beings to words produced by human beings, and it is not susceptible to non-subjective corroboration. It can of course be believed but this, I would argue, involves human selection of what, and what not, to believe. If the ideas we have about God are based on the Bible and human thought, then does it not follow that "God", too, is a human product? If this is so, does it not then raise serious questions about the consistency of referring to God as "our creator"? Further, should we not be prepared to question (or at least answer others who may question) exactly who, or what, is being worshipped in our services? (Is it just our own ideas?)

Some like to assign "mystery" to God but if this approach is adopted great care needs to be taken when making definite statements about God. Identifying that which is stated to be unidentifiable is another form of inconsistency. If humans are finite beings with finite capabilities (as our physical nature and dependencies seem to imply) then it seems reasonable to assume that there is a limit to the human ability to comprehend. If this limit is ever reached, then an inability further to comprehend would be indistinguishable from there-being nothing further to comprehend, and a point of ultimate uncertainty (and a choice, perhaps, between hope and despair) would be reached. It seems, then, that progressive understanding tends towards a point of uncertainty. If "God" is believed somehow to reside beyond the human ability to comprehend, then any attempt to identify specific features, and limit "God" to our range of comprehension, expressed in our own language, would be inconsistent with the incomprehensible nature of "God". While it may be tempting to argue that the characteristics we assign to "God" are metaphorical, this latter term is a human figure of speech identifying a perceived



resemblance. If “God” is incomprehensible, however, we cannot ever be certain that the resemblance exists, and we may be making statements that are inconsistent with the nature of God. (We may describe someone as “a snake” but unless we know the characteristics of both the person and a snake, we cannot substantiate the metaphor.) That Jesus had “God” as his focus may be a natural consequence of his life experience and an up-bringing within the human understandings of the time. This is not to deny that there may be much more to the circumstances in which we play our lives than we have the capability to ever perceive and understand, but I would suggest that much benefit might be gained from reviewing how we relate to what is incomprehensible, in 21st century, and evaluate whether or not “God” is still the best way to address the underlying uncertainty with which we are confronted. (The best way to create an atheist, I suggest, is to give an individual an image of “God” that they simply cannot reconcile with their life experience and acquired understanding.)

Statements to the effect that “God created everything”, that “God is good” and that “God is love” do not sit happily with nature “raw in tooth and claw”. It can be comforting to sing about birds singing sweetly in the trees but less so, I suggest, if we were to sing about the commotion caused by a crow snatching a baby pigeon from its nest in front of its parents’ eyes (all part of “God’s” creation?). Selectivity is a great tool for making us feel good (or bad) but not so good for painting a realistic picture. There comes a point when comfort singing becomes rather self-indulgent and exudes inconsistency. Some may still subscribe to the notion that everything “bad” stems from “original sin”, but that does not account for flesh-eating dinosaurs tearing other living entities to shreds (assuming occurrence of such events is believed in) long before mankind appeared on the scene.

There may be those who subscribe to the notion that some degree of inconsistency is inevitable and question whether it really matters. Many people may not even be aware of inconsistencies in Christianity but that does not prevent them from being influenced by public statements made by others, who perhaps have a particularly prominent media presence, and who have their own serious concerns about the consistency of “God” narratives (inherent or with other common systems of understanding). I further suggest that inconsistency, in some circumstances, can be perceived as hypocrisy, lack of integrity or even dishonesty. (We only have to look at recent events in British politics to see how sailing too close to the wind, when

interpreting what actions are consistent with the rules, influences public attitude towards individuals and what they stand for.) It may be possible to write a whole book about how inconsistent Christianity can be, or at least can be perceived as being, but all it would probably achieve is making people feel depressed. So, what has modern Christianity got going for it?

The stories of, and about, Jesus help us understand what it means to love (albeit exemplified in historical and cultural contexts very different from those found in 21st Century.) Love, to the point of sacrificing one’s own life, while still being concerned for those causing one’s suffering (“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”), as an affront to injustice and corrupting power, is a stark lesson on truly valuing the lives of others and overcoming the selfish, self-survival drivers endowed by human evolution. It seems as relevant today as then, particularly in light of the ability humanity now has to destroy itself, the environment it inhabits and the other life forms sharing that environment. “Love - the desire for optimal outcomes for one or more others, regardless of reward, contradictory perspectives and actions, or the cost to oneself” (my personal definition) is a difficult skill, and we need all the help we can get to master it. Churches can, and do, act as focal points for love, compassion and forgiveness, where people can explore the loving propensity, and sense of being loved and forgiven, that can be found deep within the human psyche (whatever subjective explanation of this experience individuals chose to adopt). It would be not only a shame but potentially catastrophic if inconsistent messages drove people away from such beacons of hope, and resulted in them being extinguished, due to lack of support. What are we prepared to let go of, to ensure this does not happen?



# Overstories and magical thinking

In a break from my usual approach of interviewing a 'progressive voice' this month, I want to present you with an idea that I picked up in Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, 'The Revenge of the Tipping Point.' I think that it is an idea which is, perhaps, helpful for us to think about together – and I recommend the book to anyone who isn't put off by Gladwell's idiosyncratic style and approach to writing.

The book is a sequel to the book which, 25-years-ago, made him famous and outlined prescient points about the world we live in today. In this book, Gladwell talks again about 'social contagion' – the way in which ideas and behaviours are spread.

Gladwell is a journalist by background, and his 'way' of writing involves taking complex ideas worked out by social scientists and telling stories that explain them. I suppose that in my own way I've been doing the same sort of thing – maybe I'm really just a Malcolm Gladwell tribute act. In any case, as a result, this new book takes long and meandering diversions to tell stories about the surprising breeding difficulties of big cats, suicide epidemics in small American towns, and attempts to engineer racial integration, among other things.

One of the concepts that is introduced early in the book is the idea of an 'overstory', and it is this single concept I want us to dwell upon.

I was already familiar with the word 'overstory' because of another book which came my way a couple of years ago thanks to my dear friend, fellow PCN member, and erstwhile committee colleague, Jenny Jacobs who introduced me to the book of that name by Richard Powers.

One of the things that novel does is challenge the idea that humans are the most important 'beings' on the planet. Contrary to our usual expectations, we are not 'the main character in the story' as my Gen Z kids would put it. Instead, trees come to the fore – in technical terms an overstory is the top layer of foliage in a forest – the canopy if you like. Trees are central in the novel. Powers writes: "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived."

By 'decentralising' humans from the story, Powers' novel helps us to see that there's a bigger story, another type of 'overstory', and to recognise that there are other forms of intelligence in the world. It's a novel that changes the way you see the world.

Malcolm Gladwell uses the word overstory in a subtly different way. Effectively he is talking about what some might, perhaps, describe as a 'metanarrative' – an overarching story, a 'bigger picture' that goes somewhat unnoticed most of the



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time but which, ultimately, shapes our thinking and our behaviour. What Gladwell highlights is that this is somehow tied to particular places. Post-modernity with its god-killing powers was supposed to rid us of metanarratives, so the theory went. Like everything, though, it didn't quite live up to the hype.

According to Gladwell, what an overstory does is shape our way of seeing the world. It conditions us to see, and understand, the world in a certain way. And of course, because I'm immersed, more or less, in a rather niche part of the religious world, it made me think about the Church.

"I thought it was really interesting when you said..." begins many a post-service conversation as someone goes on to tell me something that they heard me say. Half the time, though, I find myself thinking: "I didn't say that... I wouldn't say that... I don't think that at all!" How, I then wonder, can I say something which I think is quite clear, and somebody else hear something entirely different?

It doesn't seem to matter, for instance, how often I might say things like: 'these stories are not to be taken literally,' or 'this is a parable *about* Jesus,' or perhaps my favourite 'you have to understand that this is all to do with politics...' No matter how often I repeat those sorts of phrases, some people will still ask me: "so why do you think Jesus said that?" Or "I wonder what he/she/they was/were feeling when *that* happened...when the manna rained down; when Lazarus walked out of the grave..." "I mean, you know it *didn't* happen, right?", I am tempted to respond. Reading 'The Revenge of the Tipping Point' made me wonder if the reason this happens is because of overstories.

"There's something different about those kids," I said to my wife, as we watched a small group of young men laughing and joking. "They have got such high levels of confidence; nothing seems to shake them." It was true, it didn't seem to matter what happened, this particular group of youngsters *expected* to succeed at things, and even when they didn't their confidence stayed strong. "Peter," she said, pointing at one lad with floppy blonde hair, "went to Eton college, that one there did too, I think," she then listed the fee-paying schools which the other boys in the group had attended.

At a cost of more than £50,000 a year, Eton college and other famous fee-paying and boarding schools, offer more than just an elite education. When parents pay full fees (rather than benefit from scholarships) they pay partly for connections which they hope will prove advantageous for their offspring. They're also paying, though, for something even more intangible – a sense of self



that is developed not just by wearing a uniform and obeying archaic conventions, but by being part of something which has its own overstory.

The top independent schools have a reputation of developing attitudes of independence and bullet proof confidence in their pupils. This is not the same outcome expected of students at the school I attended, a somewhat anarchic and low-grade state high school. Mine was a school where, some years later, a teacher literally hid a whole class of students in a squash court to keep them away from an OFSTED inspector, and where my brother's year were told to leave school a day earlier than they were scheduled to in order to save the school from the epic damage due to be inflicted by last-day vandalism. The methods those schools have used are open to question, and there have certainly been some horror stories.

Preparing for an arduous walking and camping expedition with the same group of youngsters I asked how they thought they would cope with some of the serious challenges ahead of them. "Oh, no problem at all," said floppy haired Peter. "This is nothing compared to what we had to do at school."

The overstory of an elite school seems to me, as an onlooker, to include a tacit understanding that achievement always comes so long as you work hard. Based on that way of looking at the world, confidence is understandable – failures become seen as obstacles to be overcome, rather than disasters that would derail you. Places have overstories. So do institutions.

According to social scientists and psychologists, magical thinking is much more common than we would think. Some would say that there's an element of magical thinking in all of us. Even the most rational among us might struggle: imagine taking a photograph of a loved one, and writing 'die, die, die' on it, before burning it in a fire. It's an uneasy feeling? Somewhere lurking within us is a latent, or an underlying, belief in the causative link between thought and action.

Magical thinking forms part of the overstory of the Church as a whole, a fundamental acceptance at a deep level, that influence can be had over 'real-world' events by symbolic physical or mental action. In religious circles, of course, this is not called 'magic' – it is given the name 'faith' or something similar, but it relies on the same stuff – special words, symbolic actions, and, ultimately, belief.

This thinking shapes the stories we tell ourselves about who, and what, we are. It forms the basis for our understanding of the stories we read together.

According to Malcolm Gladwell's new book there's something about a place that shapes the behaviour of people – he tells a story of a previously respectable doctor who, after moving to Miami, got involved in a serious fraud. There was something about Miami itself, about the overstory of the city,

Gladwell concludes, that shaped his behaviour. Partly this was the fact that such fraudulent schemes were rife in the city – in a place where seemingly everyone was committing fraud it wasn't such a big step to begin doing so yourself. In fact, you might start to find yourself feeling out of place if you weren't. The overstory of Miami shaped the way he thought, and then behaved. In a similar way, although not a geographical place, the overstory of the Church seems to shape the way people think.

"Magical thinking gives adults a sense of control in a confusing, disempowering and impersonal world," wrote the Rev'd Haydn McLean in an article for the Journal of Pastoral Counselling, recounting his own experiences of the phenomenon. "For generations on my mother's side of the family, it has been taught never to lay a book atop a Bible. A Bible, if it is to be included in a stack of books, should always be placed on the top of the stack... Not to do so might tempt a spiritual curse."

Such prohibitions against the placement of Bibles may not be so prevalent in our churches, but all the same an overstory which includes an element of magical thinking shapes how stories are read, how prayers are directed, and how people hear sermons, talks, and other reflections. In some cases, it shapes too our responses to issues and concerns – leading to desperate hopes for miracles or supernatural intervention.

The psychologist Jaqueline Wooley, quoted by McLean, explains how the magical thinking of childhood is transformed into that of adulthood: "The point at which culture withdraws support for belief in Santa and the Tooth Fairy is about the same time it introduces children to prayer. The mechanism is already there, kids have already spent time believing that wishing can make things come true..."

The Church has developed an overstory which encourages, even relies upon, magical thinking. This is not, perhaps, the bar to wider public engagement that we might think – there is plenty of magical thinking in the world, after all. But what it can do is prevent us from engaging in important matters, and ideas, that require us to put aside a reliance on 'magic' or 'wish fulfilment' and get our hands dirty. Such thinking also shapes the way we hear the stories that our tradition is based upon – if we have an overstory which includes magical thinking it's easy, natural even, to go 'straight there' when we read stories of miracles or exorcisms. "It's not to be taken literally, it's all about politics," I splutter. "How do you think they felt when it happened?" Comes the reply.

Can the progressive movement offer the wider Church an escape from the magical thinking of our overstory? Are we quite sure that magical thinking doesn't shape the way we see things too? How do we begin to perceive what sort of overstory we are living in, when it shapes the very way we see the world? Answers on a postcard please...

# Whisper Ethics

## A Christian Approach to Political Decision Making: Introducing Whisper Ethics

There has been a central focus for my life for as long as I can remember: I have wanted to live the teachings of Jesus. I began this journey like most Christians with prayer. Taking my cue from Romans 13: 3, I asked God to make me into a new creation. It never worked. God never answered my prayer.

Next, I tried the Bible. Most Protestants take their cues from the Bible when thinking about the relation between religion and politics. This approach didn't work either for several reasons. The first is that the Bible is a very human book written by 1<sup>st</sup> century writers with very different pictures of who Jesus was. The result is you can find a Bible passage to support any political position you choose to take.

This problem can be readily seen if we compare two contemporary writers. Wayne Grudem is the author of *Politics According to the Bible*. His book could have been written by a staff member of the Republican National Committee or the Trump White House. Grudem finds a biblical passage to support small government, school choice, lower taxes, a strong military, reduced government regulation, an out-of-control Environmental Protection Agency, and the absolute right to own a gun.

Jim Wallis, another passage picker, comes to very different conclusions. In *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong*, Wallis cites Christian scripture to support nuclear disarmament and the massive transfer of wealth to poorer nations. He supports responsible gun control legislation, and policies to reduce economic inequality in the United States as well as policies to combat racism. His politics reflect the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic party with a biblical passage to support each position.

When we move away from passage picking and consider the big picture, problems persist. The Old Testament is a mixed blessing. You see deep concern for the poor, the marginalized, and a preference for solving disputes with nonviolence throughout. On the other hand, you find support for slavery, and women are considered to be second class citizens. In the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges you meet a God leading his people in battle and ordering the genocide of innocent victims in villages that are non-Jewish.

While many Christians believe the New Testament to be a big improvement, similar problems exist. Yes, there are the teachings of Jesus calling for economic and social justice, inclusion, and the

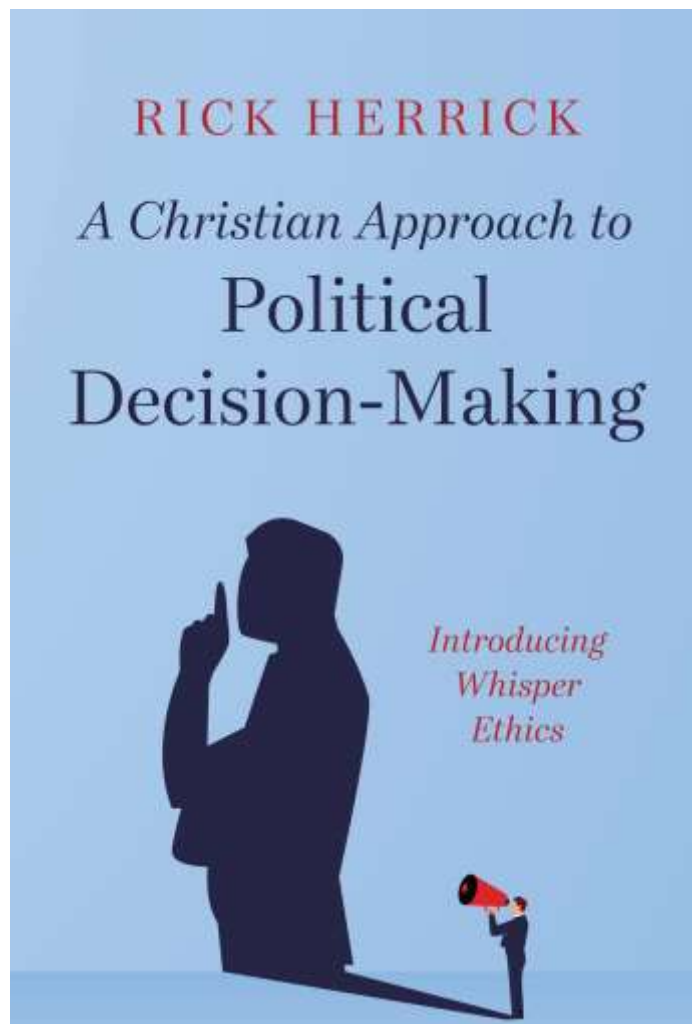


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practice of nonviolence. And yet slavery is still supported, and women remain second-class citizens in several letters alleged to be written by Paul. There is an attitude of revenge against enemies found in the apocalyptic writings which occurs in several places in the New Testament books (see especially the Book of Revelation), and there is an exclusive focus among the followers of Jesus. Salvation is only for a select group of people. According to Peter, only a small, privileged group will receive salvation in heaven. (Acts 10: 39-41)

With these problems in mind, the Bible, at least for me, presents significant problems for providing clear norms to inform political decision making. The prophets, Jesus, and Paul inspire me. I get goose bumps when I read about the political positions they took in the societies in which they lived. I pledge each day to live and act more like they did, but I don't take my cues for political decision making from stories in the Bible about them. My cues come from a different source.

The starting point for understanding this new source is the human self. The human self operates like a master computer program that defines how we see





the world. Genetics plays a major role in defining that master program. Fifty percent of human behaviour can be explained by genetics. (Plomin 2018, *Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are* Allen Lane)

Genetic factors produce what we might call the first draft, but the self is not a fixed entity. It is subject to constant change. Our experiences from birth revise the master program that makes up the self. These experiences include lessons learned from parents and teachers, relationships developed between family members, friends, neighbours, and co-workers, trauma in all its forms, and our successes and failures. Our self is constantly changing as a result of new experiences. Our picture of the world is subject to revision and change.

An important structure within the self is the ego. The ego is a personality structure organized around our insecurities, grievances, and demons. It is based on the assumption we need to be defended, that we are separated, isolated, alone to face the world and thus in need of protection. In pursuit of our defence, the ego generates thoughts that tell us to win, to succeed, to compete. Ego generated thoughts condemn others and look for revenge when the ego perceives we are threatened. Because of such thoughts, we become self-absorbed, obsessed with our own self-centred concerns, which creates a dense smokescreen within the self, making it very difficult to see the needs of others and to process messages reflecting off of divine love.

The evolutionary process, based on survival of the fittest, reinforces the ego's influence over human consciousness. With survival as a central concern, the brain generates images in the mind organized around survival. These images function as a voice urging us to act in our own self-interest.

But there is another voice pulsating through our awareness that generates very different thoughts. This voice reflects off of the ground of goodness and love which, based on my experience, comes from God. The God that nourishes my life is known in an encounter. My heart fills when I gaze at stars, stare in silence as a fawn nibbles grass alongside her mother or sit on the bank of a river watching the water flow by. When I witness suffering or reach out to care for another in need, love again floods my awareness. Meditation on gratitude or loving kindness toward others can produce a deep peace that really does pass all understanding. These experiences often leave me with a sense of something more. An objective account of what I'm experiencing does not fully explain it.

What is important to understand is that the love encountered as we proceed through the exciting journey of life inspires thoughts. Pay attention to the thoughts floating through your awareness when you witness another person suffering. As your heart fills as you gaze upon a newborn baby, what are you thinking? When you read about some act of injustice in a newspaper, how do you feel?

The thoughts that emerge from the situations described above reflect off of the sense of goodness and love that is woven into the fabric of life, but the specific content of the message is produced by the individual receiving the encounter. What we hear is not God's voice, but our own voice infused with a love reflecting off of the divine ground. Whisper Ethics speaks to these thoughts. The origin of an individual's thoughts reflects off of different grounds or bases. To simplify somewhat, self-centred thoughts reflect off of an egocentric base or structure within the self. Other-directed thoughts reflect off of a ground of goodness and love that is built into the structure of the universe.

To get a clearer understanding on how this works, let's take an imaginary trip to an elementary school in an impoverished section of the Bronx in New York City. As you enter the building, you see several broken windows, cracks in the walls along the hallway, and chipped paint. As you enter a third-grade classroom in a trailer with no air conditioning, there are thirty-five students in the class with one white student, a ten-year old of Russian descent. Your escort into the school explains that the teacher is the third full-time substitute in the last six months. Now imagine you are approached by a little black girl with two missing front teeth. The girl smiles at you and in a soft, shy voice welcomes you to class.

I know for a fact my heart would melt with compassion. The experience would haunt me for days with thoughts of the huge injustice being perpetrated on these innocent children. The source of these thoughts of injustice is not my reptilian brain or the thoughts relating to memories, habits, emotions, or goals. The underlying source of these messages of grave injustice comes from God. People who want to become followers of Jesus need to listen to these thoughts and act on them.

Whisper Ethics has no passages from scripture to ponder, debate, or cite. It puts God in charge of our ethical decision making. We act in the world as Christians not because the Bible tells us so, but because we are responding to messages from God that gently flow through our awareness. By acting on those messages, we join with God to make the world a better place. That's a very exciting idea.



New York City Department of Transportation  
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# Fairtrade

Fairtrade is a system of certification that aims to ensure a set of standards are met in the production and supply of a product or ingredient. For farmers and workers, Fairtrade means workers' rights, safer working conditions and fairer pay. For shoppers it means high quality, ethically produced products.

There are over 1.9 million farmers and workers in 1,411 producer organisations across the Fairtrade system. 91% are small-scale farmer organisations.

British consumers and companies choosing Fairtrade sugar sent more than £5million in premium back to sugar cane smallholders last year.

"Our research shows that Fairtrade certification increased the social wellbeing of households by up to 20 per cent, as opposed to no or alternative certification," said Manuela Günther, Lead on Monitoring and Impact Evaluation at Scio Network and the study's research manager. "Households related to Fairtrade certified producer organisations also had a higher economic resilience, which helped them to better weather the impact of Covid-19 and will contribute to greater resilience in the face of future crises as well."

Mars Incorporated, ECOOKIM and Fairtrade launched a groundbreaking new cocoa farmer livelihoods improvement program — Livelihoods Ecosystem Advancement Program (LEAP) — in what they believe could be one of the industry's most comprehensive efforts to date designed to address persistent barriers to cocoa farmers' ability to achieve a living income. And why? Because most cocoa today is grown on small family farms with little access to electricity, clean water, reliable roads, or quality schools. Compounding these challenges are the effects of climate change and persistent market failures — recessions and the like.

Fairtrade was started in response to the dire struggles of Mexican coffee farmers following the collapse of world coffee prices in the late 1980s. Following continued appeals for fairness in trade from Mexican small-scale coffee farmers, the Fairtrade Foundation was established by CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Traidcraft, the World Development Movement and the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

The first Fairtrade certified product was Green & Black's 'Maya Gold' chocolate bar. The chocolate bar, made with cocoa from Belize, was launched in 1994. It was followed shortly after by Cafédirect coffee, Percol coffee and Clipper tea.

50% of Fairtrade is owned by farmers. In 2019 it was the 25-year anniversary of the first Fairtrade product in the UK. It is estimated that over those 25

***Changing the world with your purse: shop ethically, shop green, shop fair, shop right!***



years Fairtrade farmers and workers received just over 1 billion Euros in Fairtrade Premium as additional funds to be invested in communities and businesses. The fundamental empowerment principle means that the co-operatives decide themselves how best to spend that money.

Fairtrade's Textile Standards are the first standard to require living wages to be paid to garment workers within a set time period (six years) and brand owners will also be contractually responsible for fair and long-term purchasing practices — essential for implementing wage increases.

Fairtrade is supporting the gender equality drive in the flower sector, where approximately 50% of all workers are women. Programmes like the Women's School of Leadership tackle barriers to women's economic development, such as access to finance and involvement in decision-making.

The Women's School of Leadership is part of a broader 'Dignity for All' programme, which benefits more than 11,000 flower farm workers across six flower farms.

Maltesers and Ben & Jerry's Icecream, Divine chocolate, all Fair Trade — Divine was the UK's first farmer-owned confectionery brand and is now co-owned by the 85,000 farmer members of Kuapa Kokoo cooperative in Ghana.

Got a baby in the family? Buy them a pair of super-soft Fairtrade and organic certified cotton pyjamas from OceanBlu which is part of the OneGivesOne Project meaning that for every purchase you make, one essential item is given to a child in need.



Coffee, soft drinks and wine are all available as FairTrade products. Look out for the label.

Look out also for the frog of The Rainforest Alliance working with more than four million farmers and farmworkers to tackle climate change, protect forests and advance the rights and well-being of rural communities.

Out on the street, all the tea, coffee and hot chocolate sold at Greggs is Fairtrade, as well as their own-brand apple and orange juice.

**Dorothy Haughton**

## Choose Fairtrade

**Tune: Suo Gan, arranged Maggie Hamilton**

Tea, bananas, honey, coffee,  
Change today and choose Fairtrade

Poor producers all will tell you  
What a difference it has made  
Fairer prices, longer contracts  
Extra payments help them plan  
Features of a fairer system  
That respects our fellow man

Multinationals squeezing prices  
Corporate insanity  
Do they think that this will really  
Benefit humanity?

All the trading rules and practice  
Testify to human greed  
Wanting change must make me willing  
To supply my neighbour's need

All my fathers may be guilty  
Of creating poverty  
All my children will inherit  
Fruits of inequality  
Noble words and abject sorrow  
Little difference these have made  
We can help by taking action,  
Keep campaigning, buy Fairtrade

**Sue Good**

## How did it start?

Recently I have been thinking about why, ever since the emergence of homo sapiens, there has been a need for, or awareness of, a 'God' or 'Gods'? What did they see, or experience, to make them think the only answer was that there must be something, or someone, 'out there' in control.

There are, of course, some obvious natural events formerly attributed to 'God' and which we now understand. Thunder and lightning, floods, storms, orbit of the sun and moon, shooting stars and solar and lunar eclipses. These natural events would have caused considerable concern and fear for people who lived two, three, four thousand years ago but are now of no need for supernatural explanation because of our greater understanding of our planet and solar system.

Was there anything other than physical events which caused people to believe in the supernatural? If so, what was it and is it still there and, as yet, unexplained?

Sometimes, when I am walking in a wood, I get the feeling that I am not alone. This is an experience shared by many people and is perhaps the origin of belief in fairies, elves and other 'wee folk'. However, our limited understanding of, for example, 'out of body' experiences, should remind us that there are many things we do not yet fully understand. To dismiss the 'otherness' of our lives as rubbish seems foolish and hasty.

For centuries, some people have sought a deeper meaning by living as hermits or withdrawing from the busyness of life for a while. Elijah and the 'still, small voice' and Jesus withdrawing to the wilderness to pray, are two examples from the bible. There are many examples in other religions, and no religion, of people who look for deeper meaning in solitude and quiet contemplation. Some find a calmness where their priorities in life are re-arranged and mental healing occurs. The experience of people during the covid lockdown would support this.

Traditional religion and its certainties no longer appeal, or makes sense, to many people. Modern life is lived in the 'fast lane'; instant gratification; 'I want it and I want it now' is normal for many. I think the role of religion should be to move towards offering an antidote to this lifestyle. It could be in the form of providing a space and support for people to be calm and allow their Spiritual side to emerge. The Quakers already practice this. Mainstream churches would do well to look again at what they are offering and their style of delivery if they want to reach out to those who are looking for a deeper meaning to life.

**David Kemp**

# Local groups

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

## Bolton

Jim Hollyman

01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

At our Nov meeting we started our study of David Wood's "More Neglected Nuggets of the Old Testament". It includes a look at the Books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Proverbs, Job and Jonah. David Wood, a retired Methodist minister, led our first session, choosing to start with Job. For each book David offers thoughts about its genre, structure and contents. This leads to a discussion of its major themes and theology. Various interpretative methods are suggested and the possible relevance of the book to today's issues are highlighted. We are looking forward to refreshing our neglected nuggets! Our group continues to meet face-to-face at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. For those who find Zooming helpful, we send out a link each month. New members, near or far, are always welcome – please contact Jim

## Newbury

Howard Grace

01635 47196 howard.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk

We continue to meet monthly. Our latest discussion was on the theme, 'Religious or Spiritual. What's the difference?' We started by pondering whether in deciding steps in life (big or small) we consciously ask whether what would be Jesus' or God's leading on this. Or do we just follow our inner prompting, whatever that may be? This led to a wide ranging and very worthwhile discussion. One of our number had also looked up this theme on the internet and found a great deal of comment. Some helpful pieces were printed and shared for discussion. For instance, "Always remember .... Spirituality came first. Religion second." If any other group is interested in this topic, be in touch with me and I'm happy to share the notes as a basis for discussion.

## Newcastle

Liz Temple

01207 505564 liz.temple@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our monthly Autumn meetings at Brunswick Methodist church have been based on self-contained themes, reflecting the interests and aspirations of the group. Our Sept meeting was ably led by Norman

with a fascinating tour through Bible translations and versions with a look at the motivations behind the actions of the translators.

We'd decided at the July planning meeting that we wanted an opportunity to speak freely about our own beliefs and uncertainties, in an unstructured setting without a pre-arranged speaker. This took place in Oct and I have appreciative reports from those who were there including the not unexpected comment, "We agreed that we'll need to continue living with uncertainty".

## Oakham

Peter Stribblehill

07918 916466 peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

In October we were fortunate to be a venue for Dave Tomlinson's tour talking about 'OMG: a BAD Christian's book of prayer'. With invitations issued we had about twice our normal attendance and his talk was well received. We are also fortunate to have been able to look at the Galilee Course from the late Tim Yeager and help assess its possible value for PCNB as a resource. This exercise is likely to continue into the New Year.

## Tunbridge Wells

Sandy Elsworth  
radpilgrims@gmail.com

After some time without a venue, we are now holding monthly weekday evening meetings in a room at a church in central Tunbridge Wells, close to rail and bus links. Subjects for discussion are chosen in advance. In a recent meeting we were encouraged to talk about a book they had read recently, relating to faith. These included some old favourites but also some surprising choices, including a novel! Not having a normal meeting in August, two of our members invited everyone to a most enjoyable afternoon tea in their garden which afforded splendid views over the Kent countryside. Some of us more recently attended a Sea of Faith conference in London.

In addition we also have a weekly meeting on a weekday afternoon held using Zoom. This is appreciated by members who find it difficult to attend the physical meetings, particularly the one or two who live outside our catchment area. Sometimes the subject for discussion is decided in advance, at

other times it flows from previous discussions or from participants' current concerns. The conflicts in Israel and the Ukraine, as well as the US election have featured.

# Letters

## Membership?

Just finished reading the current edition of PV - and probably prefer your revised details of membership. Thanks, as ever, for PV.

**Christine Whitworth**

I think the second wording is better.

**George Drake**

First I want to say that the second statement about membership better reflects my position. You really are providing contact with a network of like minds. With the absence of a local group I value any opportunity to read the views of others. I often think I live in a Progressive desert because I know only a few to chat with and many of my former friends have died or are physically or mentally in decline. I appreciate all that PCN do to keep me in touch. I have been searching for a modern understanding of that which humans have, since the beginning, been aware but struggle to express. We now have a greater understanding of the world and its place in the universe which contrasts with the views expressed in many hymns and church services. Many now think it has little or no relevance to their lives and congregations are, in many village churches, confined to a few old folk (in God's waiting room!). My grandchildren do not go to church but I think they are, if not consciously, looking for an alternative to the pressures of our materialistic world. We find a common bond in our relationship with each other, our celebration of our differences and recognition of values such as love, compassion and kindness.

**David Kemp**



# The Nativity Story in Context



**Harry Houldsworth** is a retired lecturer, a lay member of the CofE and lives in Nottingham and Wetwang, Yorkshire.

The Church has been impossibly slow in admitting to the world that many of the stories in the Bible are legends, developed from an ancient, sincere, but probably incorrect idea that Jesus' life and death were prophesied in the Old Testament.

One problem is that the earliest Christians could not see that Jesus' teaching was truly different from much that had gone before. It had its origins in ideas developed on the great trade route, the "Silk Road", linking China, Persia, and Palestine. Well before Jesus was born, Confucius advocated "not doing to others what you do not want done to yourself", and the teaching was adopted by Jewish teachers such as Hillel. And this is hinted at in the Nativity Story. The Magi illustrate a link between the birth of Jesus and "new" ideas from the "East".

The value of the Nativity Story is not dependent on it being historically true. Indeed, many modern scholars are confident that Jesus was born in Nazareth and that all the details about a Bethlehem birth are there to link Jesus to prophecy in Jewish Scripture (The Classical world had a deep respect for prophecy and a great distrust for "new" thinking.)

The birth of Jesus in a humble stable is in total contrast to the mythical birth stories of gods in the ancient world, or of princes and kings who were born in palaces. This contrast has amazed us since the Gospel story was written and made the story relevant to the lives of ordinary people.

For 2000 years Christians have identified with the idea of Jesus being born in a stable, near animals: lying on straw when he wasn't being held by his mother. Jesus is portrayed as a normal baby, born in an ordinary family, even a dysfunctional family, as there was a scandal about who Jesus' father was. And the idea that there was no room at the inn; this links Jesus with the homeless and oppressed.

Love is at the heart of Christianity. This is another key lesson, and family is evoked as a necessary unit in any healthy community.

Mary, as mother of Jesus, became the focus of later adoration and worship, promoted initially by a succession of wives of Roman emperors, who saw

themselves, also, as "mothers of gods". But it is the importance of mothers and women in Christianity that is evoked in the Nativity Story. The story is not just about powerful kings and "men", as was often the case in the ancient world.

One could go on, developing lessons from the Nativity Story, but what matters is that people in the 21st century understand that every detail in this wonderful story has been believed by Christians as historically factual for nearly 2000 years.

People in past ages did not think it strange that God would have marked Jesus' birth in some special way. Why not have a star guiding kings, who come to worship a new-born "king"? Or, why not have a choir of angels singing in the sky? Celebration is good for the soul, but the central message remains that unselfish love and a life of service and duty, are at the heart of any successful community.

However, a principal reason for the Church to (finally) accept that the Nativity Story is legendary in character, is to prepare all Christians today to understand that the Bible must be valued principally for what it tells us about the ideas and values of our ancestors. Today science and democracy provide us the basis for adjusting our moral codes and values to suit the needs of the 21st century, as, quite often, what seemed right 2000 years ago, can now be challenged. Hence, biblical "truths" do not always equate with literal interpretation of the Bible. The Christian Church needs to recognise this and, critically, make this clear to all its own adherents.

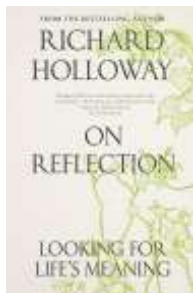


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# Reviews

## On Reflection by Richard Holloway, Canongate

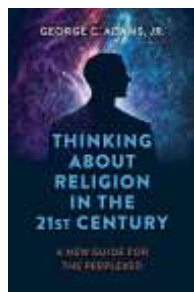


Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, scholar and radical theologian, holds many honours and is the author of numerous articles and acclaimed books. He is widely regarded as a formative voice in rethinking Christianity. Now, in his ninetieth year and encouragingly as sharp as ever, he looks back over the questions that have tested and haunted him throughout his life. There are 24 brief essays, each taking an issue of personal importance which he explores afresh as he engages in the process of 'thinking things over again'. Well-chosen extracts of poetry provide a gentle, readable tone to this book but the questions he asks, and the issues he raises, are as challenging, important and relevant as ever. These include the big questions around the existence of God, how humans can deal with grief and how we can make change in a deeply troubled world. His analysis is open, properly critical and certainly challenging but fundamentally heartening. On 'has faith a future?' he writes 'faith can have a future as long as we let it be faith and not claim it as certainty'. On 'secular faith' he writes 'as well as being part of the problem that faces humanity today, religion could also be part of the solution'. His concluding essay on 'thanking' looks at the issue of ultimate meaning. He is uncomfortable with the idea that the purpose of the universe is 'God', and equally rejects the proposition that there is no meaning at all. He suggests that there are no answers so perhaps it is 'time to stop thinking and start thanking'. Whether familiar with his ideas or not, this book is well worth reading for those of us on the 'progressive' journey.

**Christine King**

## Thinking about Religion in the 21st Century by George C Adams Jr, IFF Books

The subtitle of this book "A New Guide for the Perplexed" gives a



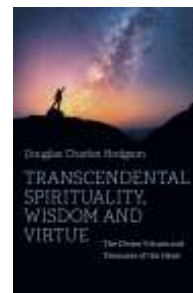
strong indication of what is to follow. The author's close friend, Jonathan, is a successful physician and is representative of the many who struggle with the whole concept of religion. Intelligent, open-minded and of a good heart, Jonathan finds religious beliefs not only laughably irrational and absurd but also morally and intellectually offensive. Hence this book in which the author aims to offer sound, rationally serious arguments presenting a case for a new emerging spirituality that is intended for "everyperson", the Jonathans (and Janes) of the early 21 century.

The author swiftly moves to deconstruct traditional religion, sacred texts, ritual and doctrine—an oft trodden path—but refreshingly, suggesting what might be put in its place, not so easy. He tackles scientific materialism, how we know what we know, consciousness, religious experience and, inevitably, the question of suffering. In an excellent final section "Putting it all Together" Adams reinforces his argument that it is legitimate for a fully informed 21st century person to believe in the existence of a spiritual reality or dimension. This will mean a process of unlearning what many traditionally thought and were taught about God and, in its place, the promise of a new spirituality. Employing 2,000-year-old symbols from a very different period of cultural development is not the only option available for a believer. So, what of the future? Belief in God will not disappear, says the author, but the precise nature of how we think about God is likely to change significantly. Even the word itself may have to be replaced by a term such as Spirit or the Sacred. This will need to be coupled with what has been called "the renunciation of certainty". In short, religion for future times will need a radical adjustment. Clinging to the old religious thought forms will become an increasingly irrelevant exercise.

This is an optimistic book dealing with the transition from things past to what the future might hold for religion. Challenging and highly recommended.

**Paul Harrington**

## Transcendental Spirituality, Wisdom and Virtue by Douglas Charles Hodgson, O-Books



A substantial anthology of over 218 pages of sacred texts from a range of religions focussing on universal principles, which Hodgson calls 'Divine Virtues'. The author

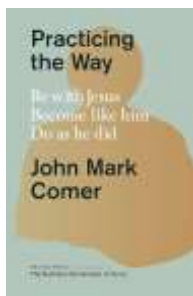
has worked in international law and particularly children's human rights and the challenges of religious fundamentalism in schools. This led to his interest in distilling common spiritual principles from the world's faiths which has become this book, which is truly inspiring. Readers will find affirmation from an extensive range of sources for thirty-six spiritual and ethical principles. They include Non-Violence, Charity, Faith, Gentleness, Natural Environment, Peacefulness, Wisdom and much more.

Hodgson aims to show the universality found in all sacred texts. Each chapter is introduced with the author's most significant discoveries from the quotations which follow. Along with passages from the major world religions are unexpected sources. They may be unknown to most readers and they provide a way to greater understanding of indigenous north Americans, Confucianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and more, as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Readers who have difficulty with traditional God language will value the inclusion of Zen Buddhist sources.

For me the quotations from Taoist sources, because of their antiquity, provide a parallel collection of texts to read alongside those quoted from the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. e.g. the chapter on Gentleness quotes from Proverbs: 'a soft (gentle) answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger' and Taoism: 'The tender and yielding conquer the rigid and strong'. Hudson's approach does mean writings which do not fit his plan are not included, so look elsewhere to see, for example, how war is justified in religious texts. The book will help readers to reflect further on these themes and discover the spiritual unity with crosses all beliefs.

**Peter Varney**

### **Practicing the Way by John Mark Comer, SPCK**



I found this book hard to put down. It is an easy read, in a down-to-earth, chatty style. But I was also gripped by because, sensing the “stable” the writer came from, I found

myself constantly curious about what he was going to say next.

Comer is an American evangelical and addresses the book to his fellow evangelicals. His aim is to challenge them to move on from the simplistic “getting saved” idea that defines Christianity for many people and explore what it means to be a disciple. He suggests that a disciple in first-century Jewish life was something like an apprentice in our society: someone who closely accompanied a rabbi, learning from his words and actions, until he became qualified to be a master himself. He then goes on to spell out what this “accompanying” involves in terms of prayer and a rule of life. He uses “practice” in its double sense. We cannot, he says, become like Jesus simply by reading his teachings and deciding to put them into practice. Like any skill, it can only be acquired by years of practising until we get it right. Comer is very widely read and receptive to a range of ideas well beyond the usual evangelical repertoire. He freely quotes Roman Catholic and Orthodox writers and numerous modern theologians and social commentators. The result is a spiritual handbook that, when taken as suggestion not instruction, can be helpful whatever our theology. In one respect, however, the writer turns out to be a traditional evangelical after all. The “apprenticeship” he describes is aimed at sanctifying the individual rather than changing the world. The examples he gives of “sin” are all about minor personal faults and failures. He seems unaware of the much greater evils of injustice, poverty, racism and abuse of the planet, and the difficult question of how we deal with our own inevitable participation in them.

**Ray Vincent**

### **God's Calling in Poetry by Frank Raj, Circle Books**

This collection of poems, one for



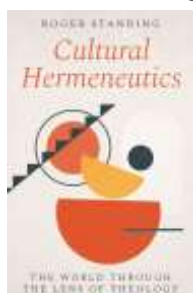
every day of the year, is described as ‘a devotional for doubting, troubled hearts’. It is an easily readable collection of poems by the author, each preceded by a biblical text. Frank

Raj is an interesting writer. He is Indian by birth, has worked extensively in the Middle East and now lives in the US. He, and the poems and the inspiration behind them, are set firmly within the formal Christian tradition but the book has been well received from outside the Christian faith and the western tradition. The author's eclectic background shines through his poetry challenging the reader to ‘speak with and listen to God’. A lot of the poems struggle, I felt, to rhyme, and unnecessarily, but once I had accepted that I was able to enjoy reading them and allow the questions they ask to prompt thought and reflection, in my own theological language. This is, however, a book based on traditional teachings. It is interesting to note that the title is designed to reflect the volume ‘God Calling’ first published a century ago, reportedly the result of direct divine inspiration, by two British women known as ‘The Two Listeners’. This is indeed a devotional book and may speak well to those for whom traditional Christian language brings peace. It is also possible to ‘read between the lines’ and to be prompted to thought and reflection by this book. I offer one extract.

(The capitals are the author's.)  
You long to see Me face to face in the flesh, visible  
See Me with the eyes of Faith: My Presence is tangible  
I wait to see you, too, bless you and work a miracle  
The problem is - I cannot if you think it's impossible.

**Christine King**

### **Cultural Hermeneutics by Roger Standing, SCM Press.**



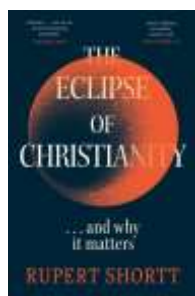
This is a fascinating although demanding book. The author is a long serving ordained minister and teacher with considerable experience of teaching theology

to undergraduate and postgraduate students many of whom are preparing to enter some form of Christian ministry. This book, written between 2021-23, grew out of that experience and its format reflects that - being very much written for students and others anxious to explore this important area. The relationship between faith and the culture in which it is lived is a complex area raising critical issues since the earliest times. But what is meant by culture? We might all say we know what culture is until we start to think about it. We soon find that it is an area with a vast array of interconnected parts which makes it daunting. This is explored in the first chapter of the book and in Appendix 1 there is a selected sample of definitions. The second chapter considers the work of H.R. Niebuhr and Paul Tillich and provides insights into inculturation and contextualisation. Chapter 3 begins to develop a theological understanding of the place of culture and its significance for Christian discipleship while the following chapter discusses insights into culture provided by anthropology, sociology and culture studies and considers how culture is read and interpreted. In the final chapter, the author discusses the development of what is termed “a cultural hermeneutic in the Spirit” which involves reading and interpreting culture through the lens of theology. He also considers “faithful presence” with reference to the work of the American sociologist, James Davison Hunter. In the conclusion, evangelising our culture is discussed and we are told that it “is not some perceived and misguided plan to transform society” but “is seeding it with the values that undergird the Kingdom of God and the actions that express it.”. For those who are students and are being “sent out” into an unfamiliar society, they must become “attentive students” of all aspects of that society including its history and ethnography. If this is done, it enables Christianity to be incarnated into whatever culture it finds itself. There is also a message here for all of us who are not involved in “active” evangelism, and it is to be “a faithful presence (in our society) that embodies and articulates the good news of God's love and of our commitment to love our neighbours as ourselves”

**Nigel Bastin**



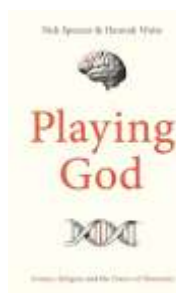
**The Eclipse of Christianity by  
Rupert Shortt, Hodder and  
Stoughton**



Christianity, Europe's age-old faith, remains critical to the survival of a humane culture. This is the burden of Rupert Shortt's latest book and while the long-established churches are fading fast numbers-wise, Christian values must not be allowed to disappear along with this denominational decline. Christianity must recover its confidence as it represents humanity's best hope for survival. The churches should be saying this loudly and much more actively. Written in journalistic style with quotes running from Popes to parishioners, the book surveys how we got where we are, the steady secularisation of society and where it all may be heading. The author is a research associate at Cambridge University and writing as a Catholic he examines the influence of the last two Popes and the present one. He offers a 'state of the nation' look at the CoFE and an assessment of what he calls the Pentecostal whirlwind, now the world's second largest Christian grouping after Catholicism. With extensive notes, appendices and an index, this is a sweeping, fact-filled survey that in parts makes for uncomfortable reading for the faithful but is nevertheless shot through with a robust defence of Christianity. The Church is presented as still being the sturdiest vessel for the preservation of the values without which civilisation will wither. A timely read for those who have given up on the mainstream denominations. Highly recommended.

**Paul Harrington**

**Playing God by Nick Spencer and  
Hannah Waite, SPCK Publishing**



Although the subtitle: science, religion and the future of humanity, might suggest it will look at creation, evolution and cosmology, the underlying concern is not who created

the world, but the status and purpose of the human. It is written for the general reader, with clear

explanations of the latest scientific theories and approaches. Nick Spencer's role at Theos, the Christian think-tank, enables him to bring immediacy and clarity to many of the contemporary 'big questions' indicated by the chapter headings. They include: How to live forever; Is there anybody out there?; Personhood and other animals; and Will AI become human? Hannah Waite has come to prominence through her clear analyses of religious statistics; her joint authorship is perhaps shown in her skill at interpreting up-to-date information about the diverse subjects examined.

Each chapter's approach is to point to the underlying reasons for holding ethically acceptable opinions. The chapter on the scientific quest for extended life or immortality is prefaced with a valuable summary of Christian theologies of the afterlife, but the authors warn that 'death is now conceived of as something unnatural and perhaps curable'. They add that human nature would have to change considerably if immortality is desirable.

The possibility of extra-terrestrial life raises questions about the uniqueness of Christ's incarnation, but also suggests that God's grace is universe-wide. Relations between humans and other species demand respect for all life. Reciprocity, cooperation, and conflict resolution are seen in animals but 'the debate about animal personhood will probably [never] be decided'.

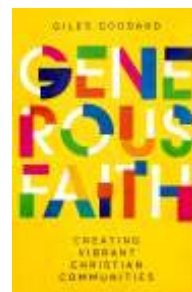
The discussion of AI becoming conscious or human, and how it should it be treated, leads to a valuable examination of the meaning of 'soul' and 'mind', and of post-resurrection 'transformed human beings'. The current debate on ending life for the terminally ill is not covered, but a chapter on abortion reminds us that for Christians only God has sovereignty over life.

The authors conclude humanistic, ethical and spiritual layers are all needed in considering these topics. Humans are embodied, social, responsible, and fragile beings, deserving of respect not for their intelligence but because they 'find their purpose and fulfilment in love'.

**Peter Varney**

**Generous Faith by Giles Goddard,  
Canterbury Press.**

This beautifully written book was a rollercoaster of a read, with nail-



biting anticipation plunging into depths of despair, moving to heights of joy and finishing with hope. Giles Goddard is Vicar of St John's Waterloo. He is an activist having

previously chaired Inclusive Church and the Human Sexuality Group. He currently chairs Faith for the Climate. Using the church calendar as a framework, the author shares his life experience and journey of faith; he particularly explores attitudes to homosexuality and spirituality from personal, societal and church perspectives. With vulnerability and candour, he describes living in the shadow of the death of his brother, the pressure of never being enough to fill the void and the constant sense of being a disappointment. He skilfully weaves church history and attitudes into the unfolding picture. The story is redeemed when he allows himself to accept the forgiveness and love he has so often assured others of. The author's pivotal point of, 'metanoia-repentance, a new mind' is reflected in the national church's exploration of sexuality, and the establishment of a truly inclusive community in his parish church along with the renovation of the church building to become a place where 'everyone is loved as a chosen person of God'. I found this book to be a page turner. I don't think this is the end of the story and I really want to know what happens next for this Vicar and his diverse, exciting congregation. I would recommend it for anyone struggling to love themselves, anyone who needs to know that change is possible, and anyone who dreams of an inclusive, vibrant Christian community. It is all possible – the book will give you hope.

**Meryl White**

**Queer Redemption by Charlie Bell,  
DLT**



Homosexuality and same sex marriage are contentious issues for the church, especially the CoFE. This has been the subject of seemingly endless discussions, debates and reports which has shown the church to be

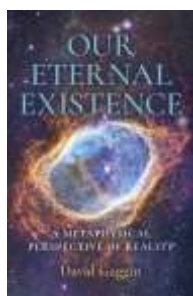


very divided and out of step with modern society. This book is another contribution to that debate by Charlie Bell whose first book *Queer Holiness: The Gift of LGBTQI to the Church* was published in 2022. The author is an ordained priest who is openly gay. He is also a psychologist, which enables him to provide an interesting perspective on a number of the issues and their effect on the individuals involved. In this second book, the issue of same sex marriage has a prominent part. He is critical of the institutional church in the way they have and continue to deal with the issue. In his view, they have failed to take full account of recent advances in science and other research which have shown that homosexuality is not a matter of choice but is part of an individual's make-up and cannot be changed by, for example, conversion therapy. He explains his use of the word "queer" rather than LGBTQI in this book is "because of its use in a branch of theology". In the discussion on same sex marriage, the issues surrounding "marriage" generally and its purpose today are considered. A close link with reproduction is difficult to sustain in these times because of the widespread availability of contraception. He urges the Church to talk more openly about sex and to explore its meaning and importance in all forms of human relationships. In the final chapters of the book, he looks to the future arguing that queerness and queer theology have a role to play in the process of enriching and enlivening God's church. But that is for the future. In this book there is much to provoke thought about the situation today. Society's view of homosexuality has undergone significant and rapid change in recent years but for older people who have been faithful servants all their lives and been taught that homosexuality is a mortal sin, this can be difficult. Although I agree with Charlie Bell, we must recognise the need for quiet persuasion if we are to bring along with us the whole Church.

**Nigel Bastin**



### **Our Eternal Existence by David Gaggin, John Hunt**



Having read the article in PV49 'Our Eternal Existence' by David Gaggin, I bought the book. I have just finished reading it for the second time – there is a lot to take in.

Some of it makes a lot of sense to me, some of it will take a lot of pondering over. We only have a human mind to think with and human language to try to express our thoughts and then try to understand what is trying to be conveyed to us – something has to be lost along the way.

Quantum science has made great advances in understanding the Universe but refuses to recognise a spiritual element to everything. Religion on the other hand recognises the spiritual, but by and large is still preaching first century theology. Metaphysics provides a philosophy that answers questions science and religion do not address – or at least tries to.

In trying to explain everything about life, reality or realities I fear David is trying to be too specific; consequently some of it, to me anyway, seems to enter the realms of fantasy – but this may just be the inability of my mind to understand what he is trying to say.

Having said that, the book has much to recommend it and has certainly made me think. I have always had reservations with 'random selection' as the way everything evolved from simple life forms to human beings. I have always believed there must be a superior intelligence behind it all. I have read Christine King's excellent review in PV50, and I find I am in complete agreement with what she says. If anyone else has read the book it would be both interesting and enlightening to hear their views. If you want to explore new avenues of thought encompassing science, religion and metaphysics then read the book.

The final chapter – 'Conclusion' tries to explain What, Who, and Why we are here living a physical life on this planet. All the main points written about are covered, but to me how we treat each other and all life forms, be they plants or animals, should be one of our main concerns - a lot to think about.

**George Drake**

## **Treasurer**

We still need someone to put themselves forward to be Treasurer next year. Our current Treasurer, Peter Stribblehill, has said that he will not be remaining on the Executive Committee after the AGM. The role is mainly one of oversight as the day-to-day keeping of the accounts is done by the Administrator. The Treasurer is required to have internet access so that online payments can be approved and the accounts viewed. If you are willing to put yourself forward you can contact Peter or Sarah to discuss it further:

[peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk)  
[sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We are also looking for people to stand to be members of the Executive Committee (often referred to as Trustees). If you have any skills that you think would be useful please do get in touch for a chat. Skills that are always useful are event organisation or management, digital communications, and marketing. All nominations are welcomed; the forms will be distributed in late March or early April next year so please think about whether this is something that you could do.

## **Norwich**

The first meeting of the new Norwich group will take place on Thursday 7th November at 11.00 in the Emmaus Room, St Catherine's Church Hall, Aylsham Road, Norwich NR3 2RJ (opposite Lidl). This meeting will be an opportunity to meet one another and share something of our journey to Progressive Christianity and determine a programme for regular monthly meetings. These will take place on the first Thursday of the month at the same time and venue.

### **PCN Britain's 2025 Annual General Meeting**

**Sat 17 MAY 2025**

Venue to be confirmed.

Dave Tomlinson will be our speaker.

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*This is gentle and engaging film-making*  
**Paul Northup, Creative Director, Greenbelt**

*I highly recommend the beautiful new short films from PCN*  
**Brian McLaren**

*These films invite and inspire us to engage in the holy complexity of  
Christianity* **Naomi Nixon, CEO, Student Christian Movement**

*A powerful and moving film (Holly's story)*  
**Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford**

*Spiritually generous and heart-warming, Gemma's film shows that  
only love can prove a faith* **Richard Holloway**



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