

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain

September 2009



Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

Eternal Life: A new vision. Bishop Spong. Don't miss the tour, or the book bargains	12
London AGM Saturday 24th October – details and how to stand for the committee	3
Wanderings and wonderings	4
What to tell the children?	5
A Quaker Journey	8
How to use our PCN Website Forums	10
Books – Ety Hillesum & Karen Armstrong	13

Spiritual Awakening A Global Vision? by John Hetherington



John Hetherington lives in Kendal, Cumbria, where he runs the local PCN Group. He was for several years on the PCN Britain Executive. He is a United Reformed Church Cumbria Area Minister and on the URC's "Free to Believe"

Committee. He has written the FTB Booklet "Reshaping Christianity", and is increasingly interested in exploring spirituality and interfaith issues. See his Facebook site: www.facebook.com/john.hetherington.

What is your expectation for the future – is it optimistic or pessimistic? Consider that question personally and globally, as you read on.

Human beings are not free. We all inherit from our upbringing a deeply embedded mindset that reinforces cultural and religious values which derive from the early days of civilisation. So, without major change the coming centuries could be deeply challenging to human survival on this planet.

In this article I argue that making the far reaching changes needed would require us to challenge many of the deep seated beliefs at the heart of each religion, culture, economy and legal system. It will need fresh cooperative thinking within Christianity and the other

faiths, as well as from those with a secular perspective. At root, today's major global problems all stem from what people believe or are brought up to believe. So, to effect change we need to frame our dialogue with reference to those beliefs which run counter to humanist values of peace, justice and equality. The project we need to build is nothing less than shaping a new humanity.

The historic faiths were built around a series of revelations by awakened human beings for whom God, Life, the All, was experienced as a deep reality. These express in all global faiths and spiritual paths in simple awe, as well as in the mystical and creative processes found in the creative arts and writing – and also in creative faith renewal movements. The world's religions subsequently developed interpretations of their founders' words and deeds, reshaped by later teachers, who often turned spiritual awareness into religious norms, with all their different forms and hierarchies. They also developed myths and laws applicable to their circumstances. Codified as scripture, these are still the dominant source of rules and guidance for most of humanity. The difficulty is that they no longer fit today's global society, economy and our sense of place in a Universe, which is now increasingly opened to revelation through the sciences. *Our way forward, then, is to transcend the time bound framing of scripture and develop a*

new 'universal text' – which owns the historic insight, but overarches it with a new paradigm.

Michael Dowd's book on the evolutionary paradigm¹ is an essential read! The story of evolution, under attack from some fundamentalists, can instead be called the "Great Story" since it frames a new collective understanding of our place as human beings.

Michael Dowd sums up his hopes this way²:

"Over the coming decades I foresee that religious believers of every tradition will embrace a far larger, more reality based view of God than was possible even a century ago. This will be a vision of the Holy One that will draw the vast majority, regardless of religion or philosophical worldview, into a place of respect, adoration, love and care for the larger body of which we are part. Scripture will have become more all encompassing and universally inspiring because altogether new writings will qualify as scripture. Our spirituality will no longer be restricted to ancient texts, we will come to know and be led by God's word in every fact, every detail, every truth of cosmic history and of that undeniable wholeness in which we all live and move and have our being."

Our societies are becoming polarised and divided because of literalist religion. Populist politics, too, is being forced to accommodate the views of literalist religion. As a result the project for global 'unity in diversity' is being slowed. Even where liberal and progressives in the faiths are putting forward open alternatives, the pressure to hold to the founding fundamentals, when they are clearly damaging and plain wrong in the light of 21st Century understandings, is accommodated by leaders who regard unity as paramount. Radical voices for change are thus contained.

It will take a profound effort to involve the world's current religious institutions in building this common vision, to provide the new 'text' for a new society, which could take us forward together globally. It will require radical and progressive leaders, and spiritual teachers, to put forward clearly the fruits of science³, working alongside an open spirituality⁴ (within and beyond the historic faiths), to roll back the fundamentalist tide. Science, secular voices, and open spiritualities are increasingly becoming partners in this post-modern world – as we better understand the Universe we inhabit⁵.

To build a new global society, our understanding of human minds and their relationship to the spiritual field of the Universe needs to expand. New holistic ways of managing disease are already being more and more recognised. At the same time we will need to manage the massive economic readjustments needed for economic justice locally, nationally and globally, as we seek

to manage the impacts of global warming. Just as we look out in awe at the vastness of space, we need to look inward, if we are to achieve sustainable stewardship of our amazing, gifted, planetary home.

The "Spiritual but not Religious" movement⁶ is helping shape this 'post religious' agenda on websites, through books and conferences. Some are working within the faiths as voices of reason and progressive thought. Others are now involved in the many varied forms of the new spirituality. I have written on this previously in a Free to Believe booklet *Reshaping Christianity*⁷. My own reading and practice is increasingly focussed on direct interfaith encounter, and appreciating the texts and practices at the heart of other faiths - particularly the Tao Te Ching⁸ and the Vedanta, Buddhist, Sufi and Bahá'í writings.

Bahá'u'lláh said:

"all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled - what harm is there in this? ... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come..."

The new spirituality will thus be influenced by many strands of insight now appearing within the historic faiths. As explained elsewhere¹⁰, radical spiritual explorations, rather than traditional faith teachings, broadly identify a set of common perspectives on the nature of reality, human life and the way to experience God. These perspectives are being explored in significant ways. Gordon Lynch (Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Birkbeck University, London) has also written about, "The New Spirituality", which he summarises as:

- the guiding intelligence behind evolutionary process and the energy of the universe itself
- Pantheism/Panentheism – replacing a transcendent, patriarchal view of God
- Mysticism and the divine feminine – using symbol and liturgy, encounter with nature and celebration of the feminine in God
- The sacralisation of nature – affirmation of the material and nature/life as participation in divinity
- The sacralisation of the self – as a manifestation of the divine (*with human self-consciousness derived from the supra-consciousness of the "All"*¹¹).
- Understandings of Religion – as culturally and historically bound and thus metaphorical –

Continued on page 15

Our Sixth Annual General Meeting – in London, before the Spong lectures Saturday 24th October 2009, 10.45am at St James’s Church, Piccadilly, London W1J 9LL.



Our AGM this year will take place at the beginning of Jack Spong’s day in London, starting promptly at 10.45 am. Bishop Spong’s first lecture will begin immediately after the completion of AGM business. Attendance at the AGM is, of course, free – but if you intend to stay for the rest of the day, you will need to have bought a ticket. All are welcome to attend, although only members of PCN will be able to vote. If you have already bought a ticket for Spong in London, we will assume that you will be present for the AGM. **If you wish to come to the AGM only, or to give apologies**, then please contact Andy Vivian, PCN’s Administrator (contact details on the back page). Full papers for the meeting will be circulated to all members very shortly.

Would you consider joining the Network’s Management Committee?

We are seeking 4 newly elected members to serve for 3 years.

Primarily, we need people who are PCN members, and:

- are passionate about the growth and development of the network
- can commit themselves to attending an all day meeting 4 times per year, plus one overnight planning meeting (days and venues negotiated between the membership)
- have some time (not necessarily much!) and energy to give.

We are not currently represented by people from:

- minority ethnic groups
- Wales
- South West England
- North West England
- Southern England (except London)

and would particularly welcome more members who are:

- Female
- Lay
- younger (ie under 50!).

But if you can’t tick any of these boxes, please don’t let that put you off.

For committee engagements, all fares by the cheapest available route are covered.

If you would like to nominate yourself, or someone else, then please complete the enclosed nomination form and return it to me. Nominations need to reach me by Saturday 10th October.

**Jill Sandham
Secretary**

Email: jill.sandham@pcnbritain.org.uk
Post: St Faith’s Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill,
London SE24 9JQ

Wanderings and Wonderings by John Weir Cook



John Weir Cook is a Church of Scotland minister, who in the past worked for 8 years in India, has been actively involved in clinical theology, and for a long time served as

minister in Kilmarnock. Now retired, he lives in Edinburgh.

I was chatting with a fellow professional not long ago and we turned to our profession and the problems I have. For him it may be easier since his practical Christianity wins out every time over thinkers and worriers like me.

I have been pondering three things -the earth is billions of years old, for about 15/16th of its history there have been no living human forms, evolution takes a long time. These facts, it seems to me, are indisputable.

I look up and see some stars but scientists are discovering many more; the universe is expanding at a rapid rate; new worlds swim into camera shot, galaxies and galaxies of them - hundreds of light years way. This is staggering, and yet on our little planet we believe in the Hebrew god.

Recently a horrendous storm engulfed the Far East - China, Japan, Taiwan. The result was calamitous and lives were lost in a meaningless tidal wash of mud houses. Bridges collapsed and although there were so-called miracle rescues, many thousands just perished as though they had never been, and often all their relatives with them...

What has this to do with God? Everything, say some, for he made the whole shebang and... 'lo it was good.' 'He flung the stars into space, he knoweth the vastness of the deep. Leviathan is his creature and one day the lion will lie down with the lamb.' Yea?

So I come back to my constant comforting awareness: Your god, John, is too small; and even as the concept grows bigger to fit the expanding universe it grows out of reach and comprehension. I don't want to be chilled out with:- We must accept that 'he openeth his hand and we are fed, if we trust in him we shall endure.' It ain't necessarily so. It fact it rarely is.

I have had to abandon a long time ago the gentle Father in the clouds, just and fair, merciful but judgemental, not above chastising to keep his children in line.

Knocking down is easier than building up, and to start building you have to start with something. But I do not know what I have to start with. Except myself. Traditionally Protestants (and others no doubt) accept that God is knowable, transcendentally and immanently. That is he is above and beyond in thunder, in sunshine, in snowdrops, in a baby's smile. Immanently means he is within. We go inside ourselves to find the secret place where we can rest - even in persecution, prison, privations of all kinds, in mourning, temptation, as well as in radiant joy.

This much I know. I have had experiences which I have interpreted within the Christian tradition which I inherited. And I have been moved to wonder in tears, to gasp at beauty, to rest in sunset shadows of depth and calm and peace. And I have felt an experience I could describe as an encounter with God, felt arms underneath supporting, and marvel as treasures were revealed in places, people, plants; music, poetry . The tremendous sense of overwhelming holiness. Holy is a big word for me and I hate to hear it cheapened, coarsened, or demeaned.

So I understand the feeling of peace, of unworthiness but of being accepted as belonging within the human scene. There is an otherness that Martin Buber describes in the I - Thou relationship.

But I am also more aware of finding something inside me that isn't quite me but is more than me; ideas that startle as though I didn't think them up myself; feelings that expand to fill up my being when I protest I am not like that! I don't do trances or visions. I don't go with George Bush and the vision thing. But I am aware of my secret life, mostly unexplored, but fascinating and rich. OK, then, I know there is a God from what happens to me from outside and from within. But that is still far too simplistic. Because despite my devotion to Jesus of Nazareth and my continuing to follow him (mostly 'down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind'), I cannot allow myself to think of God as a person, even one to pray to.

Now this is a big problem because I am a professional prayer and I do succumb to the easy way of addressing God, and I try desperately hard not to ask for anything except maybe forgiveness, and that too is rubbish for only I can forgive myself. But in private I no longer pray i.e. find words to talk to the big man upstairs.

I wonder and ponder quite a lot (although not nearly enough) What a relief to stop blaming God for tsunamis or car crashes or cancer, or any trivia that ,measured against the aeons of time since the big bang, doesn't mean more than the butterflies heart beat.

To draw things to a sort of stopping point - the quest continues. I am discovering love in the most unusual and exceptional way. I am

discovering the kind of zeal I had when I set out to change the world, and failed miserably, but I was on a track then trying to live as if it mattered, as if there was a purpose, as if suffering and death were ennobling and could be borne with dignity, Making a good death because it matters is a great aim of mine, for in deeper ways and higher thoughts than I have yet had or am able to express I believe it matters and *that* somehow is about the Spirit of divine, slender hope, the spirit of suffering and love, that is not exclusive but embraces all, the spirit of all that uplifts and draws us on. Then we transcend the mundane, the trivial, the petty, the cheap and narrow, and sink into the depths of that which I, for the time being, choose to call God.

What do we tell the children? From the Newbury Group



The cover illustration from *Jesus and his Kingdom of Equals*, published in the United States by Polebridge Press on the life and teaching of Jesus, and intended for children in 4th-7th Grades, ages 9 – 13. It was reviewed in the Newsletter in June 2008. Have any members experience of using it in the UK church setting? Ed

For the July meeting of the Newbury group we discussed the question, “What do we tell the children?” Our concern was not so much what children are taught in school, as what they are taught in church. The person who raised this issue said that as an active member of a local church who enjoys working with children she is often in a dilemma when what the children are being told in church or children’s groups is very different from what she believes. In these situations, how do we progressives answer questions about the main aspects of the Christian faith such as God, Jesus, the Bible, prayer, and the after life?

Another member of our group said she had experienced the situation in connection with her grandchildren - as her daughter, a very traditional Christian, accepted much more of the Bible as literal than she herself did. We

agreed that children could relate to and learn from many of Jesus’ parables for example but we were uncertain how to tell the miracle stories. We were all agreed on the importance of encouraging a child’s spiritual development by nurturing his/her sense of wonder and connectedness with others, and with the Divine.

One participant spoke of visiting a Chinese school where children, aged about six, sat silently for five minutes each day to ‘listen to the voice within’, also to share the thoughts they had. Children seem to respond to this approach.

Members of the group who had become disillusioned with institutionalised religion felt relatively comfortable about answering their children’s and grandchildren’s questions without reference to traditional teaching. Some of us on the other hand felt the institutional churches still have a lot to offer that’s good and important and that this is our children’s heritage. We discussed the importance of children to be encouraged to think for themselves. As one child put it after being told about Columbus’ journey into the unknown, “Daddy, did Jesus think the earth was flat?”

We would be happy for any feedback from other groups on this topic.

Olive Maines, Howard and Maria Grace.

News from local groups

Bath

(Sheena Carter 01225 331806
s.m.carter@pcnbritain.org)

We have enjoyed a very stimulating first year under the leadership of the Rev. Ron Garner who, unfortunately for us, has returned to the United States. This coming year, therefore, various members of the group will take it in turn to lead meetings. We meet on the fourth Monday of the month from September to April (excluding December) in the Central United Reformed Church Halls (Grove Street entrance) at 7.30 pm. If you are in the Bath area and would like to come along, please do - we would be delighted to see some new people.

The programme for the first three months is:

Sept. 28th - Out into the world: challenges facing Progressive Christians (from Living the Questions 2)
Oct. 26th - A passion for Christ: Paul (from Living the Questions 2)

Nov. 23rd - An exploration of some of Bishop Spong's interpretations of Scripture.

We also maintain a library of Progressive books, many passed to us by Ron and his wife. All available for loan.

Birmingham and West Midlands Group

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

Everyone is welcome to our lively discussions, which last for about one and a half hours. We meet about every two months in members' homes, usually beginning at 7.30.p.m.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday 8th September at the later time of 8.00.p.m. (just a one-off) at 11 Highfields in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B61 7BZ - please get in touch with Tessa for details as parking is difficult. The discussion will take the chapters on 'Thinking about Evil' and 'Thinking about Sin' in Windross's *The thoughtful guide to faith* as the starting point. The following meeting will be on Thursday 12th November at 7.30.p.m. Venue and topic are still to be decided, so please phone for details. We hope to meet further north, possibly in Birmingham.

Dundee

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

This group has been going for about a year and numbers may reach 10 or more. We have people attending from Fife and as far afield as Aberdeen. We have been progressing through "Together in Hope", which seems a fine place to start for people to get to know each other, feel comfortable in open discussion and cover key topics. The one rewarding diversion we had was a discussion led by Ian Bradley of St. Andrews University on the celtic church. Ian's research and knowledge on this subject was very helpful in thinking about a church of the future. We have also followed the debate in the Church of Scotland on the call of Rev Scott Rennie to Aberdeen, Queen's Cross. Particularly relevant with a member of Queen's Cross in our group and with Scott leading worship in the Dundee West church where our

group is based. The importance of an open christian understanding seems ever more crucial. Currently we meet temporarily in a member's home. Anyone interested in joining us, contact Gordon Sharp as above.

Edinburgh

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

Our group has a new venue this session. We will be meeting in the Cluny Centre on Braid Road, which has on-street parking, and is also accessible by bus to Morningside Station. Meetings, which are - with one exception - on the last Monday of the month, continue to begin at 7.30 and to finish at 9.30 p.m. Average attendance is between eighteen and twenty. All are welcome...

Plans for this autumn are:

Mon 28th September: 'This I do believe...'

Speaker; Rev Dr Mary Henderson

Mon 26th October: Discussion following Bishop Spong's lecture at St John's on Thurs 22nd October.

Session led by John Weir Cook

Mon 30th November:

Book extract from 'Together in Hope'

Discussion led by Jean Williams

Mon 14th December:

Please bring a favourite poem or reading. Followed by wine and mince pies!

Exeter

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

We had a good term, completing Anthony Freeman's three historically fascinating and deeply thought out talks on Christian attitudes to life after death, and finishing in July with Rev Iain MacDonald on a topic taken from the eight points entitled 'Living with Uncertainty'.



Anthony Freeman speaks to Exeter members

This provoked excellent debate and is available on CD from Chris Avis or as a word document from Liz. Anthony's three talks are available from the same reliable source. (See page 16)

We have three meetings planned: October 4th Iain MacDonald on another eight points of PCN theme:

'Spiritual Community?'. Ian says 'I think I would like the question mark... We will explore what it means to be a spiritual community (if we think we are one...)'. On Monday 26th October we host Jack Spong's visit at URC Southernhay at 7.30pm. If you haven't yet got your ticket contact Chris Avis (01392 425322 / chris.avis@tiscali.co.uk), or the PCN office. On November 8th Brian Wilson will lead discussion on poetry as an approach to God, inspired by his article in the PCN newsletter: further details to come.

Gloucestershire

(Frank Godfrey 01452 533825
frank.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We have completed our study programme of the '8 Points'. Healthily not every member was in total agreement! The use of the word 'progressive' creates most unease. Whilst it is an appropriate descriptive term for a community moving on from old positions, it also seems too value laden, implying one-upmanship. No suggested alternative term had enthusiastic support.

One member asked about the reliability of Gospel records. This will be our study theme over the next meetings, beginning with an appreciation of early manuscripts. (The internet has rich resources here.) We look forward to John Churcher's visit to us (Nov 21st) on the 'Gospels as Social commentary'. We still normally meet at 2.30 p.m. on the first Saturday of each month.

Harrogate

(Philip Goodwin 01423 563990
Philip.Goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our 'Journey Group' meets at Wesley Chapel, Oxford Street, Harrogate (HG1 1PP for SatNav buffs) at 2.30 pm on the first Thursday of each month. Fall-back topics come from Tony Windross' *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith* and Adrian Smith's *Tomorrow's Christianity and Tomorrow's Faith*, though invariably a 'crop-up' topic comes from group members from their reading or the press, radio & TV programmes etc.

Should you relish the idea of diversity, come and share thoughts of faith with up to 9 Methodists, 6 Anglicans, a Quaker, a retired radical Methodist minister, retired Vicar, and active URC and Baptist ministers. If you live within reach, do join us - 2.15 pm if you want coffee.

Kendal

(John Hetherington 01539 726181
john.hetherington@pcnbritain.org.uk)

John Hetherington writes: The detailed programme for the Kendal PCN Group (in association with the Kendal Ecumenical Group) has not yet been finalised. Please contact john.hetherington@pcnbritain.org.uk for up to date information. It is likely that over the course of the year there will be some one off sessions - based on my study trip to Turkey in May 2009 with Norman Borg and Dominic Crossan (yes - in the flesh. We have also purchased 'First Light' and 'Jesus for the Non-Religious' to add to our 'LTQ2' and 'Eclipsing Empire' DVDs from Living the Questions;

and will likely use these during the later part of the year and into 2010.

For anyone who wants to know more about the Turkey Pilgrimage there are photographs on Facebook - www.facebook.com/john.hetherington.

Leeds

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

PCN Leeds meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church/Centre every second Saturday of the month, with coffee/tea available from 9.30, between 10 and 12.

Meetings up to Christmas:

12th September - Discussion of Ch.1 of *Together in Hope: The God of Hope: The God Difference*. It is not necessary to have read the particular chapter beforehand.

10th October - Discussion of Ch.4: *Hope through the Scriptures*

14th November - Meaningful Poetry - a 'bring and share' session

12th December - Session on Prayer / Prayer resources
We encourage members of the group to suggest topics for a talk or discussion, and sometimes we have an outside speaker. Occasionally one of us will talk about his/her own journey through life, or we will have a bring and share meeting; we had an interesting session some time ago where people came with a favourite hymn and one that they didn't like, and gave reasons for their choices. We aim for variety! At the September meeting we will also talk about the viability of the Wednesday evening sessions.

More information from Sandra Griffiths as above.

Lincoln and surrounding area

(Angela Smith 01522 869417
angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk)

North East Lincolnshire

(John Sharp 01472 509857
john.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The two groups are continuing to work separately, at slightly different paces, through the "Living the Questions" material. We are holding another joint meeting in early September at which we are inviting members to ask the rest of the group one question which they are genuinely concerned about. The rationale behind the title "Living the Questions", we hope, will apply here and we trust the groups will have the stamina to deal with the challenges the meeting should provide. Our membership is very diverse and the answers will happily reflect their range of views. Later in the year, the two groups will meet again, this time with an outside speaker to give extra stimulus to our discussions. Both groups are ready to accept new members. We are both nearly up to capacity, but we are able and ready to split into smaller groups if demand should require it. We feel very strongly that our activities are very important as a lifeline to individuals who do not find that the opportunity to question in other groups or congregations.

London, Herne Hill

(Ted Offerman 020 8852 7063)

ted.offerman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We continued last term with our study of Together in Hope which was thought provoking and enlightening. Towards the end there was a strong feeling that we should be more active on some of the issues we discussed with a view to effecting change. In particular we agreed to lobby the General Synod on the issue of women and the Episcopate. As this issue remains in its committee stage at present, the time is not appropriate. However when it comes before the Synod early in 2010 we will begin to lobby synod members. It is our hope that all PCN members will do the same.

We ended the session with our usual summer garden party, followed by a successful session when each of us brought along and read a prayer, poem or other passage, not necessarily 'religious', which spoke to us of God.

In our autumn meetings we shall be looking at *The First Paul* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

North Somerset

(Brian Wilson 01934 876940)

brian.wilson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After two successful years, the North Somerset Group has agreed to re-convene after a summer break on 6 October 2009 at 7.30 pm. We have all agreed that in the intervening period we will try to read Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. That will be the focus of our discussions at the meeting, which will also aim to agree a programme for the year. Anyone interested in joining the group should contact Brian Wilson as above.

Salisbury

(Lavender Buckland 01722 780488)

lavender.buckland@pcnbritain.org.uk)

A new group is being formed for PCN members in the Salisbury area, which meets for the first time on Monday, 26th October. Martin Godfrey will bring and share with the group copies of books, CDs, and articles that various groups in Hampshire have used over the past five years. The meeting will be at the URC Chapel, Main Road, Broadchalke, near Salisbury, SP5 5EH, starting at 7.30 pm, with coffee at 7.

Sedbergh

(Martin Dodds 015396 20308)

Martin.dodds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Sedbergh Group is an independent open discussion group with a membership currently including Methodists, Anglicans and Quakers one or two of us are individual members of PCN, and one of 'Sea of Faith'. Members' views range fairly widely over the 'liberal' spectrum from orthodox theism to non-theist. We usually take a particular book to study, and have attempted [with varying success!], titles by Jack Spong, Marcus Borg, Richard Holloway, Adrian Smith, Hilary Wakeman, Keith Ward and Sjeord Bonting. Topics covered have included issues of theology and biblical interpretation, comparative religions, issues of faith and science, as well as the dilemmas of suffering, morality, etc. Having covered

them once they are by no means exhausted, and not 'solved'!!

We meet fortnightly in a private home in an informal atmosphere, but one in which we try to ensure that everyone who so wishes has the opportunity to speak before launching into general debate or discussion. Our new session of meetings started on Friday 25th September, looking at 'The First Paul', by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. For venue details contact Martin as above.

Tees Valley and North East England

(Michael Wright 01642 851919)

michael.wright@pcnbritain.org.uk

Michael Wright writes: In Middlesbrough, I continue to run a monthly Bible study attended by a small but very mixed group of Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Quakers. Some of our attenders have been shocked by the views of others, but we explore our differences in a very open, warm and respectful way. I have a list of PCN members, and intend to contact everyone and see if we can arrange a get-together, perhaps in Durham, Newcastle or Hexham. I would be glad to have thoughts and suggestions from members in the North East.

There is in a group of like-minded progressive Christians based in Newcastle called *Breathing Space*. They have about three meetings a year, usually on a Saturday morning in Newcastle at the University of Northumbria. Their next meeting is on October 31st when the speaker will be David Boulton talking about his book "Who on earth was Jesus?" - described as a comprehensive study of all the principal contemporary schools of historical Jesus scholarship. Contact for more details: bobbie@olympiag.freemove.co.uk. For information on other activities which may be of interest to PCN members, contact me as above.

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims

(Pat Churchill 01892 531541)

pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org)

Everyone is welcome to our meetings which are generally on the last Thursday of the month. (Do ring me to check time and venue). We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course.

In June a small group of us spent most of the evening listening to a talk given by Richard Rohr at Greenbelt. Our intention was to listen to a bit and to continue with discussion, but by common consent we listened a lot, discussed little and went away with a great deal to think about. If you haven't found the greenbelt website yet, it is an excellent source of inexpensive CDs and MP3s by a wide variety of speakers. For the July meeting members had each been asked to produce a 150 word profile on some aspect/understanding of Jesus. This led to very interesting discussion ending with the effect of the Oxford Movement on much of our worship and how it had made Jesus more remote.

The rest of our programme until the end of the year is:

Thursday 22nd October, a report on a retreat held by Christopher Jamison at Worth Abbey on finding happiness; monastic steps for a fulfilling life

Thursday 26th November: discussion on what Jack Spong had to say in October
Thursday 17th December: Doing December differently, ideas from Nicola Slee's book of the same name.

Vale of Glamorgan

(Janice Proctor: 01446 401152
janice.proctor@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group has met every fortnight, even through the summer. Group members are so enthusiastic that we didn't want a break. Our average attendance is about 13 but we have had as many as 20. It has been a great sadness to lose our founder, Revd Sue O'Hare, who has moved to Caerphilly. Sue was an inspirational leader as well as a dear friend. She'll be a hard act to follow but we plan to keep in touch with her. Our

new convenor, Janice, has been a member of the group from the beginning and we meet in her home. At present we are studying the Guide to the 8 points by which we define Progressive Christianity. We did look at the points when the group was first set up but are now going into greater depths to try to clarify our thinking. Members also discuss books or articles that have interested them. We have recently set up a lending box so members can borrow/lend books. Our discussions are stimulating and often controversial but we also have lots of fun and fellowship and find that we are developing real friendships. We welcome new members. Anyone who happens to be visiting South Wales would be welcome to attend a meeting.

Letter from the chair John Churcher



PCN Britain may be a small organisation but there is always something going on! Since my last Letter from the Chair there has been a positive response to my invitation to those who attend local meetings to go that step further and become members of PCN.

Although numbers are not everything, to any membership organisation a paying loyalty is vital. The result has been an increase in new membership of almost 30 people. All new members have received the official welcome letter from me but I take this opportunity to thank local Group Convenors and members who have encouraged others to join. As I said in my previous Letter from the Chair, the more members we have then the greater the income to fund the many exciting plans that the Management Committee continues to discuss and to implement, both as leaders and as listeners to local groups and individual members.

Increasing income will also enable the Management Committee to continue to improve support to local groups and members through, for example:

- resources such as book publications and the website developments, including a more active Forum;
- greater contact between Group Convenors and the Management Committee;
- supporting local initiatives enabling members and others to hear friends and

mentors such as Marcus Borg, Dom Crossan, John Bell and others.

Other positive support is given to members through the arranging of national speaking tours of some of our great encouragers such as Jack Spong who will be speaking at our AGM on 24th October (*details on pages 3 and 12 in this Newsletter*). I hope to meet many of you on that occasion and invite you to consider how you can help PCN-Britain continue to develop – perhaps by standing for election to the Management Committee or, if there is no group in your immediate area, considering starting a new one? And that is also additional good news – over the past 3 months or so, half a dozen new PCN groups have been launched or are about to be launched around the U.K. The more PCN groups that exist then the wider will be the influence of progressive Christianity as a viable alternative to the failing theologies of the past. The God that I experience in Jesus of Nazareth is always the 'More Than' God and, in this context, I know that PCN-Britain does not have all the answers! But I am convinced that we can continue to make a really important contribution to saving the Church in these Isles. However, to do this we need to be together, supporting one another and increasing our membership numbers and involvement to ensure that we can continue to play an active part in this work of the ever-renewing Spirit: the Spirit of constant new beginnings.

Blessings
John Churcher.

Andy Vivian writes on

How to use the PCN Britain website forums



PCN Britain has a set of public forums attached to its website which is an ideal way for members to put their ideas and concerns in front of other members (and, indeed, anyone who cares to visit the site). Here is a simple guide on how to make a posting on any of the forums.

First you need to register

- Go to the PCN website:
<http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk>
- Click on **Forums** in the left hand column (one click not a double click)
- Once there, look for the word Register at the top left of the page and click once on it.
- On the registration page provide the answers required. Here are some tips:
- Where it says Username, many of our members have decided to use their own first and last name.
- Where it says Password, type something you will find easy to remember.
- Where it says Screen Name you can type something different to your Username if you wish, but many of our members have decided to stick with their own name.
- Now enter your email address. Ignore the URL question unless you have your own website.
- Then fill in the word recognition puzzle which is designed to stop machines from registering on the website.
- Now read the terms on which you can use the forums and tick the box to say you agree.
- Click the Submit button once.
- Almost immediately you should receive a registration email from info@pcnbritain.org.uk with an activation link for you to click. Please

click this link only **ONCE**. Clicking twice or double clicking will mean you get a confusing error message, (although in fact you WILL still be registered)

To make your first entry.

- Follow the first two instructions above in order to return to the forums home page.
- Fill in your username and password in the slots at the top right of the page and click once on Login to the right of these slots.
- Now choose which of the 6 discussion forums you want to post into and click on the title.
- Once in the forum you can either click the New Topic button, if you want to start a new thread, or you can click on one of the existing threads where you will find a button called Post Reply, which allows you to add to that thread. A thread is a series of messages on one topic.
- You are now in the template for writing your message. If you are starting a New Topic you will need to fill in the Title box. If adding to an existing thread, you will only need to fill in the Message box.
- When you have finished writing, press the Preview Post button which is at the bottom of the page.
- Review what you've written.
- Finally press the Submit Post button, which is next to the Preview Post button.
- That's it.

Choosing the right forum

It is still early days but most people have chosen to put their posts in the forum called General Discussion. Within this section you'll find seven existing topics. In the Current Events forum there's been a challenging discussion between two PCN members called "Israel/Palestine problems". Feel free to add to the existing threads or to start a new topic.

Site Seeing – more for webbies, by Chris Avis

Next time you and your mouse are browsing together, there are a couple of sites worth a look even if you've visited before. The website of PCN's near neighbour Free To Believe was redesigned earlier this year, with additional pages added more recently. Although built 'in house', www.freetobelieve.org.uk is quite attractive visually (apart from the webmaster's mugshot) and, like PCN, is intended to help and encourage Christians travelling open roads of faith. My CD listings of conference recordings etc are included and have recently been updated to include talks by

Anthony Freeman on Life After Death plus Ann Pettifor on World Justice and the Environment; full details on line.

For a source of church 'wayside pulpit' posters that are free of charge to download and refreshingly free of cringeworthiness to display, visit Tony Compton's website at www.compeldes.co.uk where you can preview a range of subject material including Easter, Pentecost, Forgiveness, Faith, Hope, Truth and even Richard Dawkins! The resolution is high enough to give good A2 sized posters from a printer with tiling facilities, and the content beats 'Jesus Saves' any day!

A Quaker Journey by Michael Wright

Michael Wright is a Middlesbrough Quaker and a long time member of PCN Britain. This article first appeared in The Guardian newspaper on 25th July 2009 and is reproduced with their permission.

A journey of faith is a pilgrimage. It is not standing still, but moving to new places with new perspectives. It involves making changes in believing, belonging, and behaving. As a teenager I made the transition from the unbelief of my parents to journey into faith.

I liked the sense of belonging not only to my own parish church community, but also the wider community of Anglicans. I was challenged in various ways about choices and behaviours for one who had made a Christian commitment. I sought to understand, in order to be able to explain to others, the doctrines I was taught.

During more than 40 years of believing, belonging and behaving in the Anglican tradition, it was the theology that I found the most difficult. I questioned, explored, doubted, and looked for explanations that satisfied me. In the end, it was my failure to find that satisfaction, and other people's behaviour, that caused me to look elsewhere for the next stage of my journey in faith.

I moved to Quakers. The open accepting attitude which is typical of belonging to most Quakers meetings, is heat-warming, refreshing, and unusual among faith communities. Quakers are often prepared to accept known ex-offenders (with appropriate boundaries and safeguards) to their meetings, and help them rebuild their lives.

Quakers are, for the most part, ready to accept and celebrate committed relationships – whether first or second-time marriages, or same sex relationships which so many church communities find difficult.

The novel "Notes from an Exhibition" by Patrick Gale illustrates ways in which the Quaker community supported the family whose mother had bi-polar disorder. Most Quaker communities have this gentle acceptance (and indeed sometimes cherishing) of difference.

Quakers are strong too on behaving. Quaker testimonies to peace, simplicity, equality, integrity, to the sustainable environment, and a concern for people who are poor, treated unjustly, or vulnerable, are daily lived out by Quakers.

Quakers are less clear about believing. We have a traditional refusal to have a creed that all members must subscribe to. The Quaker community coheres around a common tradition and way of doing things rather than a common way of

describing beliefs: orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

While some British Quakers have a concept of the divine which is close to the classical orthodoxy of Christian tradition, many have difficulty in agreeing the words that adequately describe their experience of the numinous. Christ is the divine saviour for some, whereas perhaps the majority of British Quakers value Jesus as an inspiring teacher, an outstanding prophet, and source of the values that characterise the Quaker way. In this, many Quakers have an understanding of Jesus with which both Unitarians and Muslims would have a large measure of agreement.

Quakers deeply value the experience of inspiration, insight, discernment, and shared experience of "the divine" we find in regular sharing in largely silent worship, interspersed with ministry from any person who feels drawn to speak.

I have found the Quaker community one in which I have been able to continue my journey of faith without the burden experienced by many in other churches who search beyond the bounds of a narrow orthodoxy. So many such searchers have been criticised, ostracised, or forced to keep silent by those who feel threatened by their readiness to explore radical concepts.

Quakerism, which emerged as a Christian reform movement at the end of the Reformation, sought to shed the accretions of formal practice, abstract theology, and hierarchical abuse in the churches of 17th century England. Nowadays, British Quakerism has a considerable contribution to make in different forms of practical service, whether in the criminal justice system, international peace work, or creative spiritual exploration.

I am grateful to have found a community of faith that can accept that my journey may be different from others, but is supportive, accepting, and open to fresh ideas – from whatever source they may come. It is a community which nurtures creative thinking, accepts difference, and offers a healing peace to those who have been hurt by circumstances or by other people.

In my theology, my spirituality, and my attitudes and relationships, I am in a different place on my journey from where I was five or ten years ago. I expect to have moved on, in ways I cannot anticipate, in the next five or ten years. I am very glad to have found the Quaker community in which that is understood, accepted, and indeed encouraged.

Forthcoming Events

October 20th, 21st, 22nd, 24th and 26th

Jack Spong. *Eternal Life: A New Vision*



Tickets have been selling fast since we advertised the tour in the July newsletter. One venue, Sheffield, is now almost sold out, but there is still space at the others. This is Jack Spong's

final book, and probably his *last* UK tour, so really it is not to be missed.

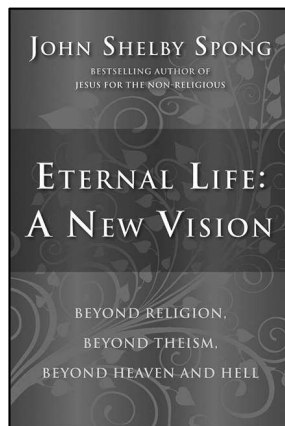
Bishop Spong is lecturing in five locations.

- **In Colchester** (at Lion Walk URC) on the evening of Tuesday 20th October.
- **In Sheffield** (at St Mark's, Broomhill) on the evening of Wednesday 21st October.
- **In Edinburgh** (at St John's Church, Princes Street) on the evening of Thursday 22nd October.
- **In London** (at St James's, Piccadilly) for a day conference on Saturday 24th October, which also includes our short annual meeting (see page 3).
- **And finally in Exeter** (at Southernhay URC) on the evening of Monday 26th October.

The London meeting starts at 10.45 am and finishes at 4 pm. All the evening meetings begin at 7.30 pm. For PCN Britain members (and also members of CRC) tickets cost £10 for the evening meetings and £12 for the London day. Those who are not members of PCN Britain pay more. It is not intended to sell tickets on the door at any of the events.

A booking form was in the June newsletter. If you have mislaid yours you can download one from the website – www.pcnbritain.org.uk – or write for one to the mailing address on the back page of this newsletter. But do it quickly.

The new book Bishop Spong is speaking to is just published in the US. Its full title is *Eternal Life: A*



New Vision. Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell. We have ordered a large number of copies for sale at all the meetings. The scheduled UK price is £16.95 and the pre-order price on Amazon is £11.89. **We intend to sell it at the meetings at £10**

a copy (though in Edinburgh where the Cornerstone Bookshop will run the bookstall the price may be different). Bishop Spong will be signing books at all venues.

The bishop has said that he expects the book to surprise friends and disarm foes. His publishers speak of the book as telling of: 'a remarkable spiritual journey about his lifelong struggle with the questions of God and death. He reveals how he came to a new conviction about eternal life. God, says Spong, is ultimately one, and each of us is part of that oneness. We do not live on after death as children who have been rewarded with heaven or punished with hell but as part of the life and being of God, sharing in God's eternity, which is beyond the barriers of time and space. Spong argues that the discovery of the eternal can be found within each of us if we go deeply into ourselves, transcend our limits and become fully human. By seeking God within, by living each day to its fullest, we will come to understand how we live eternally.

Spong takes us beyond religion and even beyond Christianity until he arrives at the affirmation that the fully realized human life empties into and participates in the eternity of God. The pathway into God turns out to be both a pathway into ourselves and a doorway into eternal life.'

Bishop Spong will also preach in South London at St Faith's Church, North Dulwich, London SE24 9JQ on Sunday 25th October, at the 10 o'clock eucharist. The service is, of course, one at which all are welcome; and people who are in London, near to London, or staying on after the Saturday conference are warmly invited to join in the celebrating of it.

St Mark's C.R.C. Embracing the Other: Jesus, Identity and Inclusivity. Incorporating the CRC AGM

Saturday November 7th 2009, 10 am to 4 pm



St Mark's CRC is delighted to welcome Ian Wallis, the new incumbent at St Mark's Church, Broomhill, to lead this autumn conference.

For many of us, our faith journeys are marked by inherited

beliefs and practices which we have let go of because they no longer sustain, ring true or correlate with our experience and understanding. Often this leaves us more aware of what we don't or can't believe than what we do. Meanwhile, we struggle to

discover or conceive another source of Christian identity and integrity.

Taking Jesus of Nazareth as a paradigm, Ian will help us to explore a way of conceiving faith that is not articulated through doctrinal formulation but which informs a vision of being human rooted in encounter and realised through embracing the 'other'. A way that interprets difference as a source of potential blessing and mutual enrichment.

Tickets are £8 for members of CRC and PCN Britain (£10 for others). You can download and enrolment form from www.stmarkscrc.co.uk or send for one to CRC office, 4 St Mark's Crescent, Sheffield S10 2SG.

And looking ahead – A Marcus Borg weekend in 2010 on 11th and 12th September.

We're delighted to be able to announce that Marcus Borg has accepted an invitation from the Management Committee to spend a weekend with PCN Britain members in 2010. The dates are now fixed for Saturday 11th and Sunday 12th September next year. Marcus will be lecturing on both days, and also contributing to worship on the Sunday.

The venue - probably - will be Edinburgh. Details do still need to be fixed, and we will give you more information as soon as we have it. We are NOT taking any bookings yet. But if you are even a little bit interested, put the date in your diary right now. It is likely to be very much in demand, and speedily oversubscribed.

Book Reviews

Etty Hillesum: A life transformed

Patrick Woodhouse Continuum Pb 160 pages, £12.99, ISBN978-1-84706-426-4

Duncan Craig questions the author's desire to tame the free spirit of Etty Hillesum, but welcomes nonetheless an original new addition to the literature of liberal Christianity.

I first came across the diary and letters of Etty Hillesum in the late eighties. Visiting the Imperial War Museum, I found the only book in the shop that did not involve fighting. I had never heard of Etty before --- not many people had, as the diary that she left with a friend had taken forty years to find a publisher --- but found it very moving. The diary covers a brief but immensely significant time in her life. Etty was a brilliant young Jewish

woman living an unconventional, bohemian life in Amsterdam as the shadow of the Holocaust closed in. She would have passed a schoolgirl called Anne Frank in the picturesque streets of the canal quarter. Unlike the Frank family, Etty refused to go into hiding, choosing instead, in her words, to share the fate of her people. She became a welfare worker in the Westerbork transit camp, then was transported to Auschwitz, where she died along with her parents and brother. Much of her diary, however, is concerned with her inner life and a relationship with God which came to be more real to her than the fear and suffering that she experienced.

Patrick Woodhouse has previously published a book on contemplative prayer and it is in this practice that Etty Hillesum's story differs from what might sound from the above to be another evangelical testament. Etty was prompted to look towards God by her friend and mentor, a psychoanalytic palm-reader who had been a pupil of Jung. She describes her initial surprise and embarrassment at falling into prayer and the subsequent deepening of a practice of wordless prayer which became the centre of her life. She had no interest in institutional religion, although she read the gospels alongside Rilke and Meister Eckhart. She refused to hate the Germans and was in turn frustrated by friends' refusal to stand back and analyse the political currents that had created their situation. She tried to see and listen to everything and to record the suffering around her.

The Case for God: What Religion Really Means by Karen Armstrong

Bodley Head, Hb 384pp, £20 ISBN 978-1847920348

Betty Saunders joins in the general welcome for Karen Armstrong's most recent book.

Having read five of Karen Armstrong's previous books on the history of religion, I turned to her latest book with eager anticipation. As the forensic title suggests, she was clearly provoked into writing it by the sometimes brilliantly presented but in content careless and ignorant dismissal of all forms of religion by the group of writers who may be grouped together as the 'New Atheists', or even as 'fundamentalist atheists', a group led by the scientist, Richard Dawkins who present religion not only as mistaken but as positively evil and the cause for all violence in the history of the world.

What she contributes to the debate is her deep understanding of the history of religion, both theist and non-theist, while others, notably Alister McGrath, have concentrated on the logic of the arguments, and Tina Beattie has contributed a feminist perspective.

She builds her case gradually and with typical thoroughness so that it is not until the final chapter (apart from the Introduction) that her protagonists are mentioned by name. Those that are now weary of the debate do not need to fear that her book is a mere repetition of stale arguments. There is plenty of substance to read and much that is new material even for those who have read her other books, although, of course, she incorporates her earlier research. The book is of value even if Richard Dawkins and his supporters had never engaged in their anti-religion campaign.

Patrick Woodhouse adds little information to his extracts from Etty's diary and letters. He effectively uses her writings as a text from which to preach, setting her up as a heroine for Christian mysticism. This approach leaves me with a rather uneasy feeling, as if an attempt was being made to bring a great free spirit under control and force a meaning onto a real life. At one point, he reminds us that church has much to offer, which is what you might expect a cathedral precentor to say, but seems a long way from a woman bowed in silent prayer on the bathroom floor. However, he has created an attractive introduction to Etty's life and thought, while adding something quite original to the literature of liberal Christianity. The full text of Etty's diary and letters is available on Amazon in various imprints for those who would like to go back to the original.

She begins this book in the caves of Lascaux in the Palaeolithic period and deals with each aspect of developing theology as it crops up in her historical account. Original Sin, for instance, is first mentioned early in her book in her section on the Creation story although this interpretation of the Adam and Eve story was not devised until the early 5th century C.E. and was never adopted by either the Jewish or Eastern Orthodox faiths. The rest of the chapter on the development of the theist concept of God suffers, perhaps, from being a very condensed and therefore potentially indigestible version of the history that is easier to read in its originally more expansive treatment in her 'History of God' and 'History of the Bible'. The non-Biblical scholar may find it easier to absorb in later chapters her condensed versions of her work on Greek thought and of her work on Islam and on later mystic and doctrinal developments in Christianity.

Tracing the history of religion from the earliest days of humanity she gradually builds her case for a more nuanced and well-informed understanding of the concept of God and of the sacred books of the faiths than Richard Dawkins and his supporters seem able or willing to take into account. She demonstrates how their case rests upon opposition to a particular and recent form of fundamentalist religion of which their 'hard-line form of scientific naturalism' can be seen as a mirror image. Unlike earlier atheistic thinkers they are not theologically literate but seem to be unaware both of the long tradition of symbolic interpretation of the scriptures and of

the work of more recent religious thinkers and scholars.

She returns to one of the dominant themes of her earlier books, the importance of the distinction between the function of human reason or 'logos' in providing factual information about the world and the function of the creative imagination and symbolism in the arts and in religion that explores the meaning of that world and of human experience. She argues for an understanding of God that is not intended to be a scientific hypothesis but is an exploration of meaning that can be understood only by the practice of spiritual discipline and living a way of life rather than through speculative reasoning.

Her emphasis on the central importance to all religions of a compassionate life-style leads her to an increasing interest in the relationship between all the world faiths, exemplified in the organisation "Charter for compassion" with whose web-site

Spiritual Awakening – A Global Vision? *Continued from page 2*

enabling a growing spirit of 'ecumenism' (*and interfaith encounter*¹²).

What I think is going on in all this, is that the 'new spiritualities' are re-discovering what was always at the heart of the Christian faith and other faiths too. In mystical experience or spiritual encounter we can come to know the One, the All, "In whom we live and move and have our being". The hope is that this will become increasingly the universal paradigm for our human societies and cultures – as they express the "dignity of difference"¹³ within the Universe's evolutionary journey. I am increasingly of the view that the cultural roots of progressive spirituality show underlying coherence, by reflecting adaptation to modernism and liberalism as well as offering a welcome to the story of evolutionary 'unfolding'.

A workable future global politics and economy also requires fundamental change. We need to shape the transition to a global "commonwealth" of peoples and nations, able to manage the necessary moves to equality and mutuality. We also need to equitably manage the potentially profound impacts of our 20th Century period of excess and greed. We will need to enhance global institutions based on our common spiritual understanding. We cannot predict what will be needed, but some of the challenges arising in the credit crunch are pointers. There will need to be a period of transition to build relationships based on "enough" and a flattening of the gross disparities modern capitalism has generated. There needs to be a full global accounting understood and applied – to ensure transition from excess consumption in the presently affluent nations, and a transfer of wealth to support sustainable growth in the countries

(www.charterforcompassion.com) she has recently become associated.

Her Catholic background tends to limit her perception of the significance of late twentieth century developments in Protestant thought to the U.S.A. omitting, for instance, the impact in Britain of the later writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer popularised by John Robinson's book "Honest to God". However, that same Catholic background enables her greater appreciation of the communal and liturgical nature of religious faith that is worth greater attention in Protestant thinking.

To sum up, Karen Armstrong brings together in this book the formidable and wide-ranging scholarship that has underpinned each of her earlier books and uses it to create her Case for God while emphasising that understanding is in the end accessible more by the practice of a spiritual discipline and way of life than by mere thought.

damaged by western greed. This will need to be supported by new forms of governance that involve citizens in decision making and a new look at the way representation can happen in a wired world. There are increasing grounds for hope that both a new politics and a new economics can emerge.

So finally, a *New World!* There are many visions of our future world – including that of fundamentalist Christianity (and its counterpart in jihadist Islam), where the world ends in a bang and a wrapping up of the universe as punishment for human sin, with only the elect pardoned. That is not the God I know or would want to know. The God I know is 'present' in all life, as the source of love, the foundation of all that is. My life is rooted in that 'presence' - those moments of deepest experience, knowing and creativity. What we are called to do is enjoy and develop our present experience of God - the All - eternally evolving and growing in and through us.

Thus, I trust that all who read this will share Julian's confidence that:

"All Shall Be Well; and All Shall Be Well; and All Manner of Things Shall Be Well."

"For God showed a little thing, the size of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.'"

Together people of faith and science can yet save this world for yet further lives, fully lived as part of an ever evolving humanity, at last at home in the stars, sharing God's All.

For footnotes see over

¹ Michael Dowd – “*Thank God for Evolution – how the marriage of science and religion will transform your life and our world*”, Plume, Penguin Group, May 2009

² *ibid*, p324

³ Eric Chaisson, “*Epic of Evolution – Seven Ages of the Cosmos*”, Columbia University Press, 2005

⁴ Anjam Khursheed – *The Universe Within – An exploration of the human spirit*, Oneworld, 1995

⁵ Judy Cannato – *Radical Amazement* – Sorin Books, 2006

⁶ www.sbnr.org/

⁷ John G Hetherington, “*Reshaping Christianity – Mysticism, Spirituality and Global Faith*” – obtainable from *Free to Believe*, 35 Arundel Road, Cheam, Surrey, SM2 6EU

⁸ Tao Te Ching – *The Book of the Way*, Stephen Mitchell Translation, 1989, McMillan

⁹ Baha’i Reference Library: <http://reference.bahai.org/en/>

¹⁰ Note ³, p14

¹¹ author’s addition

¹² author’s addition

¹³ Jonathan Sacks, ‘*The Dignity of Difference*’ – *How to avoid the clash of Civilisations*, Continuum, 2002

Whatever Next?

is the title of a series of three talks concerning life after death given to the Exeter PCN group earlier this year by the Revd Anthony Freeman, a priest and author whose books include *The Emergence of Consciousness* and *God In Us*.

Under the three headings of *The Bible Witness*, *Mediaeval Developments* and *The Modern Age*, Anthony presents a comprehensive and fascinating history of Christian attitudes to life after death right up to the present day.

A set of three audio CDs of these talks is now available at a total cost of £10 including postage. Each disc provides just over an hour of presentation and discussion, tracked and labelled as usual for easy access to any part.

Send your clearly printed name and address plus a cheque made out to C. Avis to Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN
These talks neatly coincide with the anticipated UK lecture tour of Jack Spong in October (see page 12) and are a fitting prelude to that event.

Copy date for the next newsletter. The next newsletter will appear in early December. Contributions for it need all to be with the editor, Hugh Dawes (hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk, or by classic mail to the PCN office address below) by **Friday 27th November 2009 at the latest** - and a bit earlier if you can manage it.

Suggesting themes to independent-minded PCN members is usually the best way of ensuring they don’t come in! But I would like to have brief reports on each of Bishop Spong’s meetings (together with photos) – and perhaps your responses to some of what he says.

There is a lot to respond to in this very full issue too. Things which will have delighted you and others which may have infuriated you – that would certainly be true for me! And then, of course, it will almost be Christmas. We may not think it history, but most of us still celebrate it. So your ideas, poems, prayers or whatever on why it matters (or perhaps doesn’t) would be good to have.

Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on the envelope of posted contributions.

Hugh Dawes

The **Progressive Christianity Network – Britain (Registered Charity No 1102164)** is itself part of a wider international network of Progressive Christian organisations, and has links in particular with the Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States. PCN Britain’s website is online at www.pcnbritain.org.uk, with information and resources. TCPC’s website also offers a wealth of material for open and progressive Christian understanding. Visit it at www.tcpc.org. You can email us at info@pcnbritain.org.uk, phone us on 020 7274 1338, or mail us at PCN Britain, St Faith’s Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill, London SE24 9JQ.

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