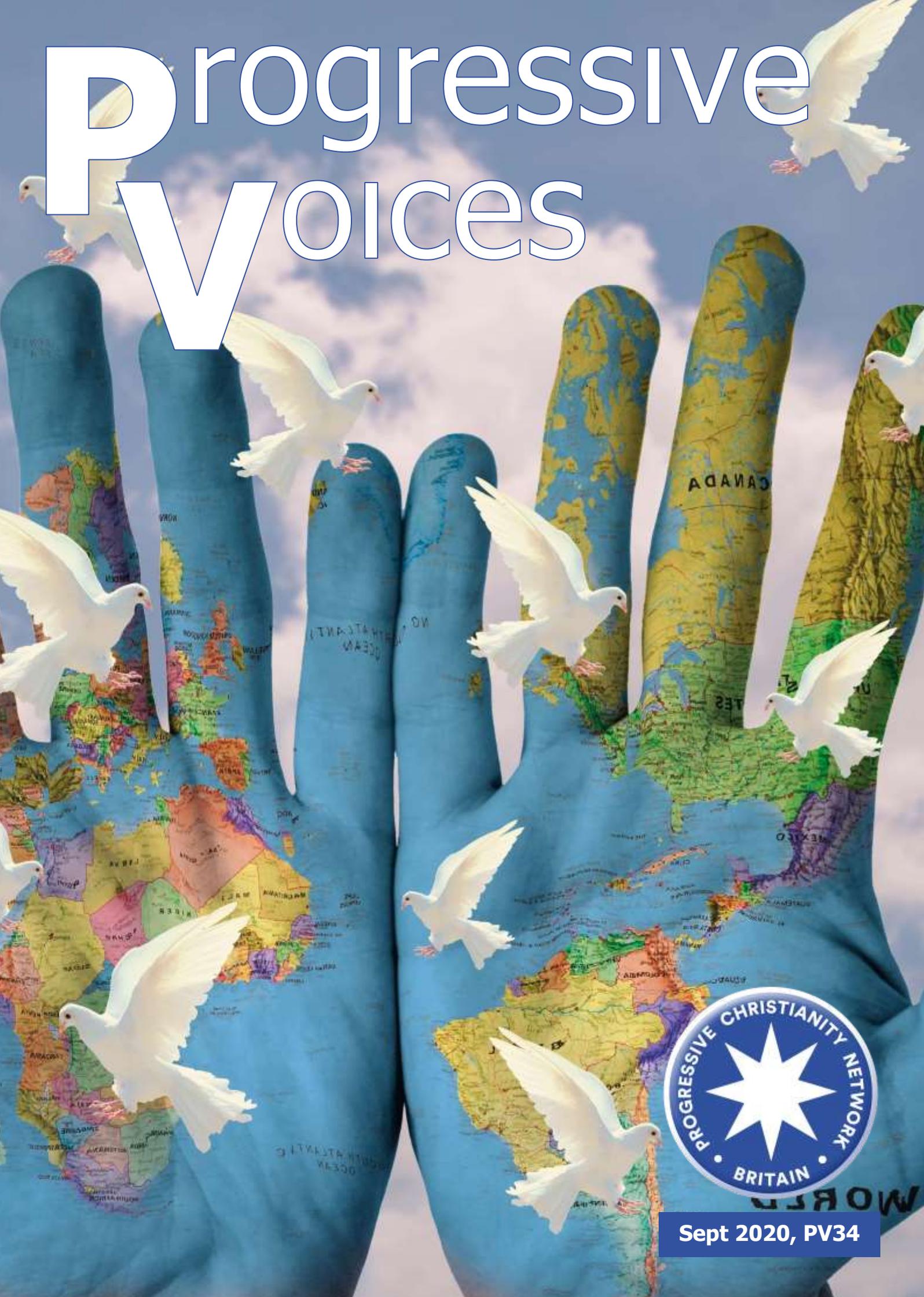


Progressive Voices



Sept 2020, PV34

I'm with Thomas

Don't rush into joy,
Death needs grieving,
Beliefs deserve thinking about,
Mulling over,
Considering.

My heart needs warming,
The soul needs stirring
Strength needs building
Mind needs stretching.
All my heart, soul, strength and mind.

Truth takes time,
To be revealed,
To be understood.

Blind faith is no faith.
Faith seeks understanding.
Faith wrestles before it rests.

Belief isn't knowing the answers,
Belief is asking the questions.
Belief is an adventure into
the ever unfolding unknown.

Living with paradox.
Letting go of certainty.
Enjoying faith's journey.

Breaking with old ways and building new.
Being, becoming and growing -
Learning,
and turning -
Towards the Light.

Meryl White

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Welcome

Our last issue came out as lockdown came into force, and this one as it begins to ease.

Entering a lockdown is pretty much a flip of the switch. Things grind to a halt and we get by for a while as we explore alternative plans. We get used to it. Bemoan it. And try to make the best of it.

Coming out of lockdown has the feel of a learner driver jumping the clutch, lurching forward and maybe stalling. The balance of risk looks very different from a national against a personal perspective. Some of us are embracing the new freedoms and others are still waiting for them to feel worth the effort. There is much talk of a 'new normal' with views that range from little to radically different from what went before.

But within it all your copy of PV arrives in your post or inbox!

Our contributions range through the Bible, Covid-19, the 8 points, worship, science and religion, a whole host of book reviews (particularly the latest from Richard Holloway), news from our local groups, and details of our film project.

Welcome to the 34th edition of PV.

Enjoy!



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Chair's Letter

There has been a great deal of praise and appreciation for the five short films commissioned by us and made by Shortform, a media company based in Manchester. When folk like Brian McLaren, Richard Holloway, Paul Northup, the Creative Director of Greenbelt, the Chief Executive of SCM and others, all give endorsing comments, it does feel that all the hard work was worth it! (The only real disappointment is that the bishop of Salisbury, the lead bishop on the environment for the Church of England, who was asked to look at Holly's story and possibly send his support, couldn't even find the 5 minutes over three months to watch it. Why does the C of E so easily shoot itself in the foot?)

'Made of Stories' is the title chosen for the collection of our five films, each of which is a personal story. Simon Cross, my fellow trustee, reminds us that we are all made of stories, a collection of our experiences, each one seen through a lens which has itself been altered by the multitude of other experiences we have been through. It is strangely and heart-warmingly coincidental that Richard Holloway has chosen for the title of his latest book 'Stories we Tell Ourselves'. Richard's book (review p.5) is in part a personal journey of how he and we, try continuously to identify the stories we have lived by, and are now living by, which offer us explanations and give us a framework to try to find meaning in (to quote Richard) a meaningless world. When you watch Holly, Greg, Gemma, Nathaniel, Patrick or Davy tell their stories, we the viewers are led to put ourselves in the story. What am I doing about climate change? Do I really know what it's like to live on a large, predominantly white, working class estate? How do I relate to someone of a faith other than mine? Am I comfortable in exploring my own sexuality? Has my Catholic or Protestant upbringing been of benefit or damaged me? There is a power in a story to open doors, to elicit change, to lead to honest reflection. I hope and trust these five films will do just that for all who watch them.

The Bible is full of stories, and for those of us brought up in a church tradition there has been an evangelical zeal to speak of 'The Church's story' or 'of salvation': trying to fit the kaleidoscopic content of the Bible into a narrative which is then offered or even imposed upon us, as though it will provide all the meaning we need to make sense of our world and our lives. The most striking example of this overarching narrative comes in the bidding prayer of the Nine Lessons and Carols service, first devised by Bishop Benson of Truro in 1880:

Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child

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But is our Christian story one of our falling into sin from our birth, to be reminded constantly of that Original Sin in the liturgies of the church, or has that framework ceased to make much sense for many people? Has not that story of our sinfulness done enormous psychological damage to countless people over the centuries? Are there other 'macro stories' in the Bible which might just have more meaning for us? Stories of love, of enlightenment, of peace and justice, of compassion and forgiveness... Recently I have been having lovely conversations with our group convenors across the UK. I have listened to their stories, their own journey of faith and the story of others in their groups. And what stands out for me is the searching for meaning in all our lives. Sometimes I am asked about PCN and its direction of travel, about what PCN stands for. For me, PCN is there to help and encourage people to find meaning for themselves and to tread the path of honesty, searching out the truth as we experience it. If religion is about the quest for meaning, then Christianity has had a pretty mixed record. As progressive Christians we find in the earthly life of Jesus a story of self-sacrificial love, a reaching out to those on the margins, a fearless challenge to those who hold political or religious power. The Jesus of history is often so subsumed into the Christ of faith that his story has, for many, ceased to have the power to change lives and to change our world. I hope we will make more films, allowing more people to tell their stories for the benefit of others but for the meantime enjoy 'Made of Stories' !

MEMBERSHIP

PCN Britain has charitable status, and we depend wholly on members for funding. Membership is for all who value an open, progressive and theologically radical voice, and want to maintain and promote that generous understanding of faith.

£30 (£15 for limited income)

Receive 4 copies of PV each year, advance notice of events, reduced event fees, along with support and encouragement.

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Review: Stories we tell ourselves

Stories We Tell Ourselves: Making Meaning in a Meaningless Universe by Richard Holloway, Canongate

Richard Holloway has been a speaker to two PCN conferences in recent years; first at a residential conference marking 50 years of Honest to God in 2013 and last year at our London conference reflecting upon the relationship of religion and atheism. As ever, the warmth, intelligence and radical honesty of this former primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church shone through. 'Stories We Tell Ourselves' is, remarkably, the 31st book which Richard has written and it will doubtlessly be devoured by many PCN members who have enjoyed the challenges of this expansive library.

Over the decades, Richard has written, spoken and preached about many areas attendant on Christianity - sexuality and gender, biblical interpretation, ethical challenges, the search for meaning. In the last twenty years, released from the obligations of episcopal ministry, Richard has written extensively about a life of faith and doubt, and states, yet again, in the closing sentences of this latest book, that he is 'no longer in the convincing business'. Richard is tired of the persuasion game. Those who have read his memoir, 'Leaving Alexandria' and the 2018 publication, 'Waiting for the Last Bus', will find in 'Stories We Tell Ourselves' the continuation of a radically honest self-reflection, a looking back on a long journey of Christian discipleship, a love-hate relationship with religious institutions, alongside a deep desire to remain a member of a Christian Church which keeps the 'dangerous memory of Jesus alive in history' (p.225).

This latest book takes the theme of story-telling (ironically coincidental with our recently launched film package, 'Made of Stories'). Holloway says in the prologue, "we all live by the stories we tell ourselves to explain the mysteries of our existence, the suffering that accompanies it, and the certain death that concludes it ... they supply the rules for living the lives we have been thrust into. The difficulty is in identifying the story we are actually living by. That has certainly been my problem, and I am writing this book to try to resolve it".

Part One of the book takes us through stories of the origin of the universe and life on our planet. As scientific knowledge has developed and new discoveries have been made, these stories have changed. Richard quotes Kuhn who suggested "that what we think of as 'true' at any one time is always related to where we stand in history". Having considered the scientific stories, Part Two leads us to question the part played by religion and God (or gods) in all this and the far more personal problem

of "how we are, how we behave ... and what, if anything we can do about it". Richard reflects on two familiar Bible stories: Creation and the Fall to discuss human behaviour, especially in relation to attitudes to women by religious groups in particular and society in general.

The principal sticking point in religion's story-telling about the origins of life and its meaning is the authoritative way it compels belief. No more so than in the tortuous Christian dogmas surrounding atonement and salvation. Before Richard goes on to examine the stories which we have been told to try to explain human suffering, there are two short chapters which examine the stories which the mystics tell of the human condition and the obvious empathy which the author has for those practices which 'itch for the transcendent' rather than the constraints of orthodox belief.

But it is the recalling of the stories we tell ourselves about belief in a good God, in a grossly unfair and suffering world, with which Holloway takes the greatest offence. Whether it be in a God who chastises, punishes or disciplines – none of which is acceptable. So where do we go from here? He finds significance in the work of a Dutch lawyer and theologian, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), who argued that we should establish our principles of justice on our natural instinct for what is right and good '*as if God did not exist*'. The whole paragraph here is worth quoting: 'Better to do the right thing as if God did not exist than to do the wrong thing in the name of God, whose existence you are certain of. It is to mistake our own projections for God and come up with a god in our own image, packed with our own hates and insecurities – an idol, a human construct. Better no-God, a-theos, than that false God.' (p.181)

Richard sees in Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity' the absolute imperative of opposing evil and injustice for its own sake, even if there is no God. The paradox, says Richard, is that Bonhoeffer believed that's what God wanted as well – for us to live and act righteously, as if there were no God. Hence faith in the true God is action, not belief, a verb not a noun. And this naturally leads Richard to see a pragmatic approach to faith, a working with all of good will, be they atheists or believers, to follow the way of radical, revolutionary forgiveness, as seen in Jesus and commended by theologians such as Crossan, whom Holloway clearly sides with towards the end of the book.

The penultimate sentence says it all: "I follow Jesus etsi deus non daretur, *as if God didn't exist*."

Like so many PCN members we are thankful for all that Richard, this wonderfully warm human being, has offered to us in this book and in so many ways.

Christine and Adrian Alker

Sept 2020 | 5

Historical Jesus and Coronavirus

This Easter was not a year when we got together with family, or went to our churches and meetings to remember the events of Jesus's last days. We did not gather together to celebrate the proclamation of his livingness. We are, in many parts of the world, in lockdown. We sign off emails by saying "stay safe." We are anxious, isolated, and unsure what the future holds. We hear a lot about death. People are losing loved ones. It feels as if there is a demon on the loose, and any one of us could be taken.

Recently, it was me. My husband and I got the virus, and we went through the lonely days of seeing it play out. It felt like a creature that could move in different ways in the body it inhabited. Along with a cough and sore throat, for my husband it was headaches, muscle aches, tight chest, and a bad rash. For me it was soft to begin with, then it went to a fever, nausea, diarrhoea, loss of taste and smell, my nose feeling like it was inflamed inside, and I had an immense tiredness. It took a different shape on different days, and things went up and down. There was the fear it would turn worse, go deep into the lungs, but finally it weakened.

Over the course of days when I couldn't do much, I thought a lot about Jesus of Nazareth, walking around Galilee, healing the sick. I thought of how Jesus 'rebuked' the fever of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:30-31). I rebuked my fever! It made me think of how much the folk beliefs of Jesus's time would have made so much sense to people, before medical science worked out what viruses were. Even with all the knowledge Google could give me, the virus felt like a thing invading me and I wanted it evicted from my body.

There have been some great studies on how Jesus healed, by Stevan Davies, John Dominic Crossan, Pieter Craffert, Elaine Wainwright, Graham Twelftree, among others. Some scholars would say it was more a kind of psychosomatic healing, or his healing had a placebo effect, because he couldn't really have cured anyone. Others look to anthropological models of how traditional healers work. I started to get really intrigued by the immune system, and realised how little we understand it. Covid-19 is mystifying because, while some people are succumbing because of known factors that make the immune system weaker, others who are strong and fit are also being defeated. It makes me think that somehow Jesus (like other traditional/alternative healers but more so) could do something to strengthen people's immune systems very rapidly. When Jesus offered 'release' (the same word as 'forgiveness' in NT Greek), what was the effect, not only emotionally but physically, on the immune system?

As a Covid-19 sufferer, you are isolated, and fearful



Joan Taylor is the author of 'What Did Jesus Look Like?' and Professor of Christian Origins and Second Temple Judaism at King's College, London

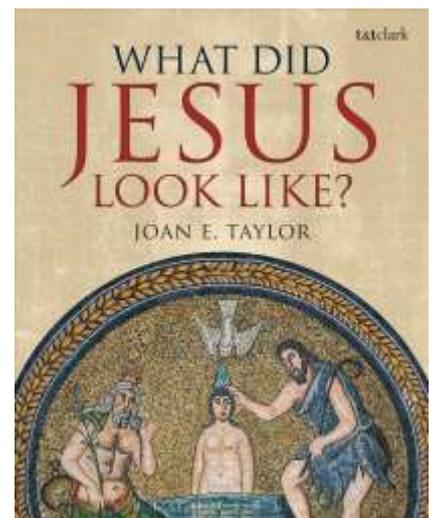
of passing the virus on to anyone. You feel like you are a source of contamination. No one should come near. You can only limp along together with a fellow sufferer, if you are lucky. Anyone possessed by a demon who made them ill in Jesus's world was unclean, but Jesus, as a rule, directly touched people with his hands. In Greek, the word for 'heal' in the Gospels is actually quite often the same word for 'save', so synagogue ruler Jairus in Mark 5:23 falls at his feet and begs Jesus: 'My little daughter is at the point of death: please come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be healed/saved, and she will live.' It makes me think also about soothing touch, and what that also does to our immune systems. Yet here we are, and we cannot touch each other.

One thing that struck me too is that Jesus 'saved' people from the grip of demons/illnesses, and never apparently got sick himself, at least not in what the Gospels tell us. I had never noticed this before, that in a place where there were deadly diseases like tuberculosis and typhoid, it is an unstated miracle that neither Jesus nor those to whom he passed on his power, who were commissioned to anoint people with oil and drive out demons (Mark 6:13), were hit with contagious illnesses.

What we are experiencing in terms of mortality in this disease is still not as bad as for people of the ancient world. There were not that many old people, for a reason. Children often died. Your spouse and close family members could die of some illness any time. We are told that Jesus, with a reputation as a healer, gathered huge crowds. You bet he did!

I am very grateful now to be recovered. I know a lot of people were praying for us, sending us blessings and positive energy, and I felt that powerful warmth of care. I strongly believe it made a difference and am enormously thankful.

But I have also reflected on the causes of this



particular virus, unleashed from a market trading in rare wild animals, ripped out of their natural habitats for the sake of human greed. We have a clear chain from the exploitation and abuse of the natural world to our current crisis, from greed to death.

Jesus is quite clear that God and nature are firmly on one side. The earth itself, the natural world, is in the hands of God, and operates according to God's design and care. Jesus looks to nature in his parables to understand what the Kingdom of God is about: God feeds birds and clothes flowers, and thus nature communicates God's message (Mark 4:26-32; 13:30; Matt. 6:25-33). In the 'Nature Miracle' stories Jesus and nature are linked: Jesus can calm down a storm, multiply more food to feed people gathered in community to hear him, or expect water to take his weight and walk on it (Mark 4:35-41; 6:30-52; 9:1-10).

Recently there have been the odd voices saying that somehow God has sent this virus as a punishment for sins, of one kind or another. However, in Jesus's teaching, God does not punish people by nature, though nature will eventually join with God in the 'birthpangs' of the new age (Matt. 24:7-8). Jesus is clear that illness is not actually from God; it is from Satan. Jesus fights against Satan and all his minions.

In the present time, for Jesus, God makes the sun come up and sends rain on good and bad alike, and accidents happen here without God punishing anyone either (Matt. 5:45; Luke 13:2-5). Nature sustains humans, and God directs natural processes, with all their benefits and hazards to humans included. Nevertheless, in Jesus's teaching God does not presently have unfettered rule of the world; that is for when the Kingdom comes. To be on the side of God now, we are to care for the sick, the weak and the marginal, and for creation. We are to tend seeds, watch birds, and take lessons from the mustard trees (Mark 4:30-32).

For Jesus it's the human will, like Satan, that is outside God's control in this age. Human decisions are made by free choice. And we can make very bad decisions. Jesus really warns against greed (Luke 12:15). We can choose to be greedy, wilfully hurt nature and God's creatures and bring disaster upon ourselves.

So now, as we move past Easter 2020, as I reflect on Jesus, I am left feeling both grateful to be better and also sad. I am sorry we all have to go through this, and lose so much. I study Jesus as a historian, but I also learn from Jesus. I hope this crisis can help us all understand more about Jesus and his call for people to repent. I hope we can share his beautiful vision of a transformed, better world.

This article is adapted from:

<http://historicaljesusresearch.blogspot.com/2020/04/the-historical-jesus-in-time-of.html>

Who's to blame?

Did God invent Covid-19? I want to say 'what a stupid question' but if God was responsible for the Big Bang of Creation, then God is responsible for everything that follows, directly or indirectly. Or is God? Did the Big Bang create a universe that is imperfect or did it create the only possible universe that can evolve into unconditional love? And I believe 'unconditional love' can only be expressed within the limitations of our language and knowledge as 'being with God at the end' which for me is the purpose of evolutionary creation.

Whoever wrote Genesis had no scientific understanding to take into account, only folklore handed down through the generations. He wrote a mythical story about a perfect Garden of Eden in which a perfect man, Adam, managed to go wrong. In the Genesis story that's why humankind is saddled with an imperfect world. In the last four centuries the scientific world has been moving us away from myth to fact, whilst acknowledging there are always questions it cannot answer. Every scientific fact is as much a provisional statement as any spiritual revelation. Both are ongoing and some would see both as directly or indirectly related. The subsequent evolution after the Big Bang has been an engineering miracle, or a trillion miracles. Evolution, or God's Holy Spirit in action, is moving Creation by degrees towards a future described in Revelation as 'the holy city, new Jerusalem' Rev 21:2. Time may eventually re-create the Garden of Eden, the place of unconditional love where God is. But the journey to unconditional love is only fulfilled when everything in Creation is making the right choices, choosing 'life not death'. Everything must possess the unconditional right to choose, and wrong choices are made. If humankind chooses to exploit animal life, we get death or Covid-19. This is not God's plan.

Unconditional love can only be achieved through the exercise of free will choosing the path of love. But our evolutionary journey is still immature and we choose to trash nature and the natural law for selfish, perhaps thoughtless, ends. Hence in China's unhygienic wet markets where live and dead animals and birds are sold, viruses to which the animal world is immune can cross to the human world which has no immunity. Some viruses have a lower death rate (Covid-19), some have a higher death rate (SARS), but the potential to decimate humankind is there without the devastation of nuclear war and radiation.

Covid-19 is not only humankind's creation but we already knew that it could happen. All the Chinese wet markets were expected to be upgraded or closed after the SARS epidemic in 2003.

Gerald Drewett

Sept 2020 | 7

What can we believe about Jesus?

In the final part of this series, which began with the stories of Jesus' birth, his public ministry and the resurrection, we conclude with the Christ of Faith.

What about the so-called Christ of Faith, what the Church came to believe about Jesus much time after his death?

The best Biblical scholarship suggests that it is very unlikely Jesus of Nazareth considered himself to be God incarnate, or the second person of the Trinity. It is also unlikely that his earliest followers thought of him in these ways. They clearly thought he was a remarkable teacher and that he had some sort of divine mission that would bring about a new order in Israel. The Book of Exodus refers to Israel itself as 'God's Son' and in Jewish literature the terms 'sons of God' and 'Son of God' are applied to the leaders of the people, kings and princes. By the use of that term they implied that the person concerned was an agent of God, acting in some way on God's behalf. The earliest disciples certainly saw Jesus in that way, but what would have been far more difficult for any first century Jew living wholly in a Jewish milieu, would be to consider any human being as actually being God. They would have considered that blasphemous.

Changing that took time, although the experience of the Resurrection, whatever that might have been, started the process. The prologue of John's Gospel, so often read at Christmas services, had its great influence. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.' (John 1.1, 14) That was a reflection on the life of Jesus, but was certainly not the only way of interpreting him. Most of the gospel passages which say that Jesus was in some way God come from John; the picture is far less clear in the Synoptic Gospels. If, as many scholars hold, John is a late composition and the words attributed to Jesus there were not spoken by the historical Jesus of Nazareth, the argument adduced in some circles that 'Jesus claimed he was God. If so, he was either mad, bad or what he says he was' is based on the false supposition that Jesus claimed he was God. Certainly the early church came to make that claim, but the truth of that does not turn on the personal integrity of the historical Jesus.

The relationship of the divine and the human in Jesus was a matter much debated and it was only more or less resolved at the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451. The Chalcedonian definition, signed by the bishops present at the Council, spoke of One Person in Two Natures, 'truly God and truly man... of one substance with the Father as touching the



Bob Reiss was a Canon of Westminster until his retirement, and author of 'Sceptical Christianity'.

Godhead... of one substance with us as touching the manhood.' That seemed to resolve the problem politically in that most, although not all, bishops and churches were prepared to accept this definition. Whether it really resolved the theological question is more difficult to know. Some maintain that it simply restated the problem.

What is clear is that by the time of the Council of Chalcedon the Church had firmly moved from its original Jewish background into one far more influenced by Latin and Greek speaking cultures, and the whole philosophical way of thinking about God and man in those cultures was very different. In a wholly Jewish culture the notion that a man could also be God would have been very challenging to their way of thinking - as, indeed, it probably is now for most people in our own time. To the Greek mind, however, a figure so obviously close to God as was Jesus, seemed clearly divine. Their problem would have been to see how he could also be human.

That came to be challenged in three books in the 1970s, all by significant figures in the world of academic theology. First came 'The Remaking of Christian Doctrine' by Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford. He thought the contrast between the reason why there is anything at all in a possible multiverse and the source of transcendent claims upon us on the one hand, and a single historical human being on the other is so great that he wondered whether the very notion was nonsense.

The second book was 'God as Spirit' by Geoffrey Lampe, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. Lampe wrote 'God has always been incarnate in his human creatures, forming their spirits from within and revealing himself in and through them; for although revelation comes from beyond the narrow confines of the human spirit and is not originated by man himself, there is not, and never has been, any revelation of God that has not been incarnated in, and mediated through, the thoughts and emotions of men and women. ... In Jesus the incarnate presence of God evoked a full and constant response of the human spirit. This was not a different divine presence, but the same God the Spirit who moved and inspired other men, such as the prophets.'

Both Wiles and Lampe, in different but related ways, were questioning whether incarnation as a concept

exclusively applied to Jesus was possible in the contemporary world, and whether it was fundamental to understandings of what Christ did, particularly through his death.

Their books were followed in 1977 by a group of academic theologians from English Universities producing a series of essays entitled 'The Myth of God Incarnate', edited by John Hick, Professor of Theology at Birmingham. The book provoked a major debate within the churches, including a rather negative discussion of it in the General Synod. But the Doctrine Commission never formally condemned the views of Wiles, Lampe and those of the authors of 'The Myth of God Incarnate'. A diversity of views even on core theological matters is allowed within the Church of England.

A personal faith

So what do I believe about the Christ of Faith? Orthodox Christianity has always asserted Jesus was fully human, and I personally want that to be the starting point - as indeed it was for the first disciples. Whatever else Jesus was, he was a human being, with all the inevitable limitations that entails. But, by his life of faithful response to God, this man showed us something of God. When we look at Jesus, when we look at what he taught, when we look at what he did and see how he suffered, he does show us what God is like. He was, in the phrase used by Bishop John Robinson, the human face of God.

That does not mean that Jesus is God-like, as though we have some preconceived notion of God and then try to impose that on the human figure of Jesus. It is rather that God is Jesus-like; the truly and completely human Jesus shows us what God is like. Did Jesus teach us profound truths about how to respond to God in the extraordinary opportunities and challenges life throws at us? Yes, he certainly did. Did he show us that God was loving and forgiving, and did he demonstrate this in his own being? Yes, he certainly did. And in his suffering on a cross can we gain some insight into what it must be like to be God, suffering because of love for a world that so often ignores and even seeks to destroy? Yes, we can.

This fully human Jesus shows us what God is like. In that sense, Chalcedon was correct; he was fully man according to his humanity, but fully God according to his divinity. Whether we can describe it today as two natures in one person is more problematic, because it is difficult if not impossible to conceive how one person, presumably with one consciousness, can have two natures in quite that way. But God was in Christ, reconciling the world, as Paul put it, because he reconciles each of us to himself if we allow him to do so.

That is what lies at the heart of the Christian belief in this fully human being.

Covid-19

Litany for Covid-19

My street is quiet now.
Cars, buses, lorries,
noisy polluters of our very breath,
have fled in disarray.
Erstwhile pedestrians
fearing encounter
seek safety behind stern doors;
peering apprehensive from windows
they put trust in technology
and hope for supplies.

Can this be judgement
self-imposed upon a world
that would not share its wealth?
Uneasy power blocs,
ceaselessly watchful,
sharpen expensive weapons
whilst swathes of humankind
sink deep in wretched penury
as the heedless live in comfort
or fall prey to luxury.

If Jesus came once more,
arose from stable birth
to point a better way,
it would be but in vain;
for when his voice was heard before
we paid it scant regard.
Neglected now as then
his wisdom stands,
an underused resource
in troubled times.

Can there be God?
If so He must forgive
until we can forgive ourselves,
discover true identity
alive by inspiration's hand.
Freed from the curse of narrow hearts
rekindled love,
compassion's fervent friend,
shall urge a kindlier harmony
than we have known before.

David Stevenson

Sept 2020 | 9

Quakers and the 8 points?

Firstly, as a Quaker I'm glad to read that these points are an "expression of Christian life" and not a creed. Quakers in the liberal tradition (which includes Quakers in Britain) are very careful about anything which might be a creed, and like to have lots of different ways to express things, especially theological ideas. In this article, I'm going to work through the eight points and share some brief thoughts on how Quakers might relate to each one.

Most Quakers would be happy to say that they "seek God, however understood" (point 1). I wrote about the difficulties of understanding God in my first Quaker Quicks book, *Telling the Truth about God*. One of the issues I explore there is the creative tension between the benefits of saying what we can say about God (or the Spirit, or the Light, or Love, or whatever else we call it) and being clear about what some of us want to deny (for example, supernatural claims).

The next bit of point 1, about being guided by the life and teachings of Jesus, is a bit more touch and go. Being guided is important to us. Our form of worship – waiting and listening in silence – is also the basis of our decision-making process, and this can be described as following Jesus (as in point 3), as being moved by the Spirit, as being guided by the Light, as doing what Love requires of us, and in lots of other ways. For the community, the process of listening is central. How it's expressed varies for different individuals: for some Quakers, Jesus is indeed the best way to understand the world, while for others the story of Jesus is part of our tradition but not their current spiritual lives. A lot of Quakers are somewhere in between, being inspired by some of the teachings of Christianity but needing to reject others which have been harmful.

Point 2, "Affirm that there are many ways to experience the Sacred and that we can draw on diverse sources of wisdom on our spiritual journeys" is a go. Diversity in experience and theological expression, and in sources of inspiration, is well-established among liberal Quakers at this point. Sometimes it's identified as a distinct trend, Quaker Universalism, but the general idea is mainstream among British Quakers. Some people go further and are strongly attached to more than one spiritual practice or source of wisdom – this might take the form of multiple religious belonging or engagement in multiple traditions. Among British Quakers, there are a number who are Quaker-and-something-else, including Buddhist Quakers, Quaker Muslims, Pagan Quakers, and Quaker Anglicans.

Similarly, Quakers would generally be comfortable with point 3, "Recognise that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and to confront evil." We might want to add something to indicate that



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following the Spirit or our conscience, or other understandings of the Divine and human goodness, also leads to this result. Acting with compassion for everyone equally informs a lot of Quaker action in the world – forming circles of support and accountability to help sex offenders avoid further crimes, creating communities of welcome and places of sanctuary to support refugees and asylum seekers, and much more. This can also involve confronting evil, in our own assumptions and the prejudices of those around us, although Quakers are more likely to express this as honesty and speaking truth to power. Quaker talk about evil is as likely to focus on what's within us as something outside, and a well-known Quaker phrase says that when attending meeting for worship you can hope to find "the evil weakening in you and the good raised up".

In number 4, "Place hospitality at the centre of our communal and worshipping life and see the sharing of bread and wine as an expression of our common humanity", we get into stickier territory. Quakers are happy with hospitality. We have shared meals as social events and many Quaker communities do offer hospitality to other local groups – although it's a joke so common it's practically a proverb that Quaker food provision can be deeply class-marked (lots of humour). The sharing of bread and wine, though... firstly, let's assume it's bread and grape juice. Although many Quakers, as individuals, choose to consume alcohol – hopefully in moderation – our historic links with the temperance movement and current connections with AA and related groups means that we usually don't allow any alcohol at all in our meetings and buildings.

Even with that proviso, though, we don't see any need to share something outwardly, in the physical world, in order to express our common humanity. We have a common humanity, given by God, and we express that through our actions, including our way of worshipping. We worship by waiting together, as equals, to see what we will be given or led to say or do. Rather than a physical sharing of food and drink, Quakers have an entirely spiritual communion. (Recent experience has revealed another advantage of this: it's reasonably easy to move it online, for example using Zoom.)

Once we're over that hurdle, we're onto safe ground again in point 5. Quakers absolutely do "seek to



QUAKERS DO WHAT! WHY?

Rhiannon Grant

build communities that accept all who wish to share companionship without insisting on conformity". On the theological front, we mainly succeed. From time to time, Quakers in Britain have an outbreak of anxiety that we're too accepting, that we ought to put some limits on who we allow to join our communities – are these people too humanist/ non-Christian / nontheist / etc.? On closer examination, though, this anxiety is part of the process, a kind of growing pain. The worry wouldn't come up if nobody was testing the boundaries, trying to come up with new and truthful ways of describing their spiritual experience and their understanding of the world. And when we look back on the things we previously worried about, we can see that over the course of the twentieth century we've recovered from these times of anxiety and remained a strong community.

We could be stronger, though, on the overlap between point 5, building accepting communities, and point 6, which says that "the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of our faith." In theory Quakers agree with this. In practice, we are only human – and accepting a wide range of theological positions doesn't prevent us from making the usual mistakes. A visitor who isn't from a middle-class background might be told, "You don't dress like the rest of us" and a person of colour is asked "where are you from?" If they stay despite this, more assumptions will unfold – about how they might be able to serve the community, if at all, or that they should educate others in the community about their experiences of oppression.

Understanding this, and working on dismantling the systems of privilege which let us do this without seeing why it's a problem, is a major task Quakers in Britain are working on at the moment.

Point 7, about gaining insights in the search for understanding rather than in certainty, should help us with this – Quakers, at least in theory, are always open to learn. In fact, we're so good at doubting things, and so sure that we should doubt all theological claims, that Quaker Studies scholar, Pink Dandelion, has labelled our position the "absolute perhaps". Some Quakers who have had spiritual experiences which affected them deeply, and really convinced them of something, report that it's difficult to share this with the Quaker community. A commitment to seeking and taking on board new evidence makes us open-minded and flexible, but a too-strong commitment to searching can make it difficult to name and claim what we have found so far.

Finally, point 8 calls for us to "Work together within and beyond the Church to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world." I say 'us' because I think this is something Quakers and PCN do share completely – in fact, the Quakers in Britain vision, laid out in a short document called "Our Faith in the Future", says almost exactly this: "Quakers work collaboratively. We are well aware that we can't put the world to rights all by ourselves. We value the important work of others. By engaging with them we are already changing the world. We want to break down barriers; we refuse to prejudge who is or is not an ally."

There's a lot of work to do. To build a just world we shall have to reckon with our history and be clear about the ways in which our society has to change to remove structural injustices – systemic racism and sexism, the barriers which disable people, and so on. Justice and fair distribution of resources and opportunities will be a pre-requisite of peace. To build a sustainable world many of us will need to make (more) lifestyle changes and push for change to our economy, infrastructure, and attitudes. Quakers are already involved in this work, alongside PCN and many others. It's not easy but we have faith that, to return to point 1, if we are guided by the Spirit which moves in our meetings for worship, by the Living Christ within us, we shall be able to find a way forward even in the most difficult situations.



Let the Worship be Queer

Worship is, and will always be, a central part of Christian faith. Worship is also, not just one thing. Music, singing, poetry, art, dance —are all creative aspects of worship. Also many discuss worshipping by living life for God, for example, worshiping God through our daily work. In this way, worship is not merely a method of praise, it is not simply a means, but a central part of our identity in Christ and, in many ways, forms our being.

So why have I titled this piece ‘Let the Worship be Queer’? Well, for me there are three main reasons: queer bodies are also holy temples, queerphobia exists in the predominant contemporary worship industry, and, finally, the importance of writing and singing our own songs.

Queer Bodies are Holy Temples

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” 1 Corinthians 6:19 (NIV)

Queer (LGBTQ+) people are God’s people. Just as with our straight siblings in Christ, the Holy Spirit is within us and our bodies are also temples. When we worship, whether we are LGBTQ+ or straight, we use our bodies. Therefore, worship is an embodied experience just as it is a spiritual one.

I am queer. When I worship I do so through and with a queer body. Just as my sexuality is often acted through my body, often my worship is too. When I worship, I do so through and with a queer body. Much more literally speaking, when any of us sing a hymn or worship song, we can often imagine the lyrics in relation to ourselves and our situations. For example, when I sing *Amazing Grace* and I hear “through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come”, I am often reminded of challenges I have endured within church surrounding my sexuality and my faith. When I sing *I Will Be Undignified* by Rend Collective and I hear the lyrics “I am dancing as David danced, in the thrill of a wild romance”, I am reminded of queer readings of Scripture and of the potential for David having been bisexual. I’m also reminded of the deep joy of dancing like no one is watching and when I dance, I do so with a queer body. It is a bit of an obvious example, but we don’t come to church —to the communion table or to worship — as empty shells. We bring ourselves as we are. Tall or short. Female, male, non-binary, gender queer. Gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual. We come as we are, and we must be encouraged to do so. So, when I come to worship, I come as queer.

Regrettably, the prevailing portrayal of queer people is of being sinful — Rev. Elizabeth Edman terms this as ‘Religious deprecation’ and counters this view by exploring the many virtues that show “... not only that the divine is alive and well in us, but that



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many of us are deeply attuned to it.” (Edman, E.M., (2017). *Queer virtue: What LGBTQ people know about life and love and how it can revitalize Christianity*. Beacon Press, p.3). I would love to see this ‘deeply attuned’ divine within queer people reflected in worship. Unfortunately, sometimes worship falls short for many of us. Lyrics and words can be exclusionary, even when offered with wholly good intentions. For example, I, as a non-binary person, often struggle with hymns in church that are divided into male and female parts. Of course, worship is intended to be directed to God and not to ourselves but, this lack of inclusion can be a barrier for people in accessing worship and facilitating that relationship between themselves and God. This is the first reason why I think we as Church could receive so much from queer worship — inherently inclusive worship.

Queerphobia in the Worship Industry

Secondly, the contemporary worship industry — by this I mean groups like Hillsong and Bethel — especially in relation to evangelical expressions of Christianity, has a long and damaging history of abuse towards LGBTQ+ people. I was 17 when I became a Christian. I was an atheist before this, with very little experience or understanding of Church and I was already openly queer. As with many young Christians, contemporary worship music from groups like Bethel and Hillsong were formative for me. Worship music from these groups fed me spiritually. So, you can imagine the level of grief experienced when I continually heard of abuse from them towards queer people. The damage done and hurt caused by Bethel’s ‘Once Gay’ series, for example and in addition, the sense of complicity that if I continued to listen to their music on platforms, that I’m then essentially helping to fund these acts of abuse and, in some cases, conversion therapies. My heart longs for a worship group or collective that is affirming, so that I may listen to and be spiritually fed in that worship without fear of supporting queerphobia or queerphobic work.

Despite their often old-fashioned wording and outdated lyrics, hymns are usually old enough for me to not have to worry about those issues. However, as I mentioned previously, so many of these hymns are outdated and exclusionary. Moreover, if I am being completely honest, a large part of the attraction of evangelical expressions of worship for my 17-year-old self was because I liked



the music. In contrast to hymns, it was modern and enjoyed listening to it. It was easy to relate to and easy to pick up and sing. For so many young people, like myself, contemporary expressions of worship keep us spiritually fed, but as a queer person, to then lose that was, and still is, devastating in so many ways. Church Clarity - a website detailing the status of churches' policies on queer inclusion via a rating system - has compiled a list of some of the main contemporary worship groups detailing their status on queer inclusion. None of them are affirming. The best you can hope for is that they are unclear on their position. (<https://www.churchclarity.org/updates/church-clarity-scores-top-20-contemporary-christian-music-ccm-artists-in-2018-lauren-daigle-mercymehillsong-worship-cory-asbury-elevation-worship-etc>) I see a need for inclusive and affirming worship and it won't happen unless we create it. Which leads me to my last point.

Our Own Songs

"He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord." Psalm 40:3 (NRSV)

Modern day worship songs often focus on the love of God. Of course, this is hugely central to Christian faith and an important feature of our worship. Though, I think sometimes we miss aspects of God's character in our worship. More than this, worship can become generalised and can lack the prophetic voice that speaks into where we, or our congregation, are. The Psalms show us a breadth of emotion and a variety of tones, moods and contexts. Each Psalm uniquely speaks into the moment the Psalmist finds themselves, and each season brings a new reflection and new mode of praise. I think there is something powerful and important to be gained from approaching worship, especially sung worship, in this way. If we find ourselves in a season of lament, our worship can reflect that. This is not to say that worship should always reflect what we are feeling in any given moment. However, with contemporary worship becoming an ever-increasing business and with our sung worship becoming more globalised, I worry we are missing the opportunity to write our own songs. As a queer Christian I have been reflecting on this

need to write our own songs, especially because those mainstream contemporary worship groups have become increasingly inaccessible for me. Furthermore, the great advantage of writing our own songs for worship is that we can make them more accessible and inclusive.

Prophetically Creative

I've sought to introduce some of the complexities and potential conflicts around inclusive worship. I hope in the future we will see an increasing number of people stepping out into creatively forming worship that is both more inclusive and which speaks prophetically into the contexts we find ourselves and the Church in. Whilst I see the value in mainstream contemporary worship, and I have gotten much from it, our towns, cities, local church communities, the marginalised, all need creative expressions of worship that is for them — that speaks to their contexts, and seeks God's voice for them. I feel that sometimes we lose this specificity and, in turn, elements of the prophetic when we automatically fall back on the big contemporary worship industry. Of course, this requires practice, patience and a skillset. However, this does not mean we should be afraid to step out and try. Worship is holy and should always be inclusive.

Material / Spiritual?

There are those whose sincerely held faith is that our world is merely material, demonstrably physical, measurable, subject to analysis, ultimately definable.

But are there hidden depths in the realm others name as spiritual? Does it have to be, one or the other? Could there be the mind-blowing physical integrated with the depth-revealing spiritual?

It seems likely that fullness of life, intricately, interdependently, comes only when we pay attention to, explore and value both.

Astonishing discoveries, insightful reflection deepen our understanding, enable wiser ways of living in this wonderful God-created, Spirit-permeated world.

On Religion and Science

Religion and science do not compete, they are complementary. This is because the work of the scientist is limited to the exploration of matter within this universe. Religion is concerned with the Divine Mystery which caused this universe to come into existence and whose presence maintains the universe in existence. The Divine Mystery is not matter, it is spiritual.

The scientific exploration of matter is hardly a limitation. It is a virtually unlimited opportunity to explore what God, the Divine Mystery, has created. The scientist accumulates data and then offers an interpretation of that data according to the values of honesty and imagination that they have imbibed from the culture around them. Little or nothing in these interpretations is to be regarded as infallible or permanent. Newton's laws ruled scientific endeavour for 250 years until Einstein's relativity theory and the splitting of the atom took away their foundation. Intuition, imagination, and vision are all used in interpreting the data that becomes available. Scientific investigation will never come to an end, and what seem to be certainties at one point in time are always open to modification.

Religion, in our case Christianity, freely admits that it cannot explain God; it can only attempt to understand God from our human perspective. As planet Earth appears to allow human beings to evolve and flourish, then God, from our human perspective, is a benign or loving 'something'. That 'something' cannot be seen with human eyes, so God can be understood as a spiritual existence characterised by love. Planet Earth and this universe is in some way within the being of God, whose totality is beyond our comprehension. Another way of putting it is that embodiment, in this case in the universe, is intrinsic to our understanding of the Divine Mystery. God has created laws of nature which operate creatively to allow complexity, for example the human being, to come into existence.

In terms of understanding the existence of the universe, that is everything within the embrace of space and time, the scientist has currently taken us back to the 'Big Bang' about 13.7 billion years ago when matter exploded from a point of unimaginable density. This is science's job to answer the question HOW did it happen? The scientist may even discover earlier Big Bangs because their job is to understand material or physical existence by identifying what immediately preceded and caused it. But they cannot identify Ultimate Reality or the Divine Mystery. This is because our ability as human beings to comprehend must, of necessity, be limited to the environment in which the human mind has been created. We are children of the solar



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system and so we cannot comprehend the mind of the creator of the solar system.

Since the dawn of human time and the development of human consciousness, the human being has wanted to know the WHY of their creation. There must have been a mind far greater than theirs to have created this planet and this universe. In this question lies the origin of religion, of worship of that 'something' which is spiritual and characterised by love, and which leads to a modern understanding that this physical or material universe is immersed in a spiritual sea. This sea holds the secret of life. Life is incredible. In any situation, animal, vegetable or mineral, it will find or create an answer to any and every situation which arises – this is the nature of divine love. Life in its animal form both adapts in order to catch its prey and changes to escape its predator.

The Divine Mystery must have a supremely rational and creative nature which works through an evolutionary process. In a physical or material world that process is achieved through the cycles of birth and death. In the field of science, birth allows new or modified genetic formulations to emerge; death allows the less progressive formulations to terminate whilst the more appropriate ones continue in new birth. In religious language God is present or incarnated in all births and all existence, and at death, in human terms, the personality is not lost; it is resurrected and continues its challenging and fulfilling spiritual journey in some way.

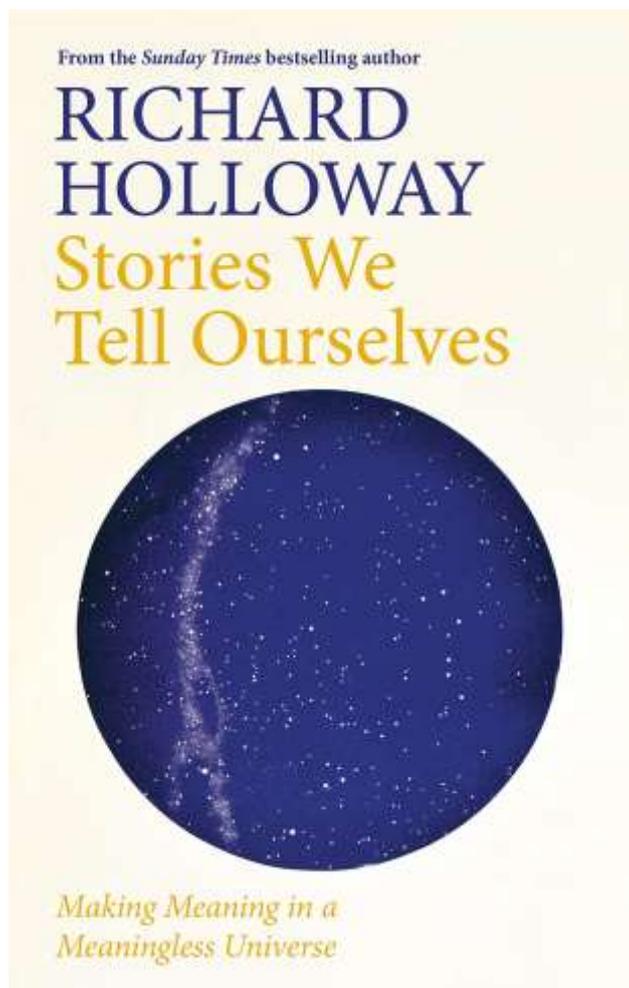
The scientist discovers facts which have come into being in the present time and seeks to build attainable futures based on those facts. All this is based on the response of our sensory systems to our environment and can be measured and tested.



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But there is something in our environment which cannot be tested. These are the experiences of love and beauty and friendship, etc. These are spiritual feelings which are experienced and are non-repeatable in any exact form. In somewhat like manner, the cells, molecules and atoms of the body and brain individually show no signs of consciousness, yet the whole is greater than its parts and the whole produces consciousness. Consciousness is to be found in a medium beyond anything physical. In like manner, sub-atomic particles are not affected by time and space; they interact instantaneously wherever they are, so they must be working in a different medium. If we call this medium spiritual, it is simply in contrast to the word physical which our physical bodies obviously live in, and in the spiritual there is still more of God's creation to be revealed. The religious or spiritual person experiences a life-giving power (faith in God the Holy Spirit) and knows that that loving power will never desert them (the meaning of resurrection).

Science does not deny the existence of God the Divine Mystery because that is not its job. It is the atheistic human mind that does that, while the agnostic human mind is more questioning and wonders what is meant by God. The believer has little problem in accepting a loving, creator God based on the experiences of living, but may yet query some of the culture-driven or ancient worldview statements of institutional religion.



Seeing the light

Have you seen the light?
Do you know the inner truth?
Have you heard the good news?
Are you a true believer?
Is your way the only way?

Do you hold to core belief?
Are you born in the word?
Is that your real prophet?
Is the eight-fold path your destiny?
Is your dogma your comfort-blanket,
your theology your pilgrim shell?
Is your real faith in people, not gods,
Because what you cannot see cannot be there?

I am ready for the conversion script -
you invite conversation.
I am ready for the scriptural claims -
you encourage dialogue.
I am ready to be told I perform -
you tell me belief includes.
I am ready for propositions and contentions -
you speak of trust and freedom.

Perhaps I shall believe what you believe,
when I feel ready,
if I feel able.

I shall analyse, compare, reflect, consider;
discuss, interpret, learn, debate,
re-frame, become mindful.
I still have things to do first.

Tomorrow I might believe what you believe.
Tomorrow I might see the light you seem to know.
I think you seem to have something I need.

You are a thin person
Through whom - I know - something divine appears,
a glimpse beyond the ordinary.
Your questions shape my journey.
What is the light, the inner truth,
the core belief?
A reality that I can trust?

I think I can see your light.
I think I need it to find my own.

Stuart Hannabuss

Big Bang, Evolution and all that?

In my time as a church minister I have had a number of conversations with people about science and religion. I had a conversation with a rather drunk guy at a wedding a few years back. When he found out my role he was most insistent that I should know that he believed in science and could not possibly believe in religion because you have to believe that God made everything in seven days. Then there were the conversations I had on holidays I used to go on with a Christian company. Without fail, someone would discover that I was happy to go along with the theory of evolution, and were absolutely astounded that a Christian could believe such things since the Bible clearly rules evolution out. Both of these conversations come, I think, from a misunderstanding of how to read the opening chapters of the Bible.

The Bible

The Bible is not so much a book as a library – it has lots of different books in it and some parts are to be read differently to others. Some of the books of the Bible, like the gospels, on the whole, seek to relate historical events with a religious interpretation, while other books, like Jonah and Job, are fictional stories told to help people think about life and God. Then there are letters, hymns and poetry and more besides. No parts of the Bible, though, are written as science as we understand it in the 21st Century.

It is unlikely that the stories in Genesis were ever meant to be read as history. In all probability, these stories were a response to some of the polytheistic creation stories already knocking around in the Middle East some 2500 – 3000 years ago, and the Israelite authors altered them to reflect their faith in one God and their own religious practices. (The same probably happened with the story of Noah and his Ark)

As such the truth contained in these stories is not the same truth you would look for in a history or science text book. The truth contained in these stories is theological and moral. Things like: there is one God behind all things; God values all of the natural world; the moon, sun, trees and animals are all part of God's creation, rather than things to be worshipped; God knows what is best for life; God values relationship with people; people have a choice whether to follow or ignore God's ways; ignoring God's ways to be properly human has consequences. The authors of these stories at the beginning of Genesis were not offering a scientific explanation of how things happened. Rather they were writing a different kind of truth to reveal meaning and morals and give sense to life.

Science

At its simplest science works by coming up with a

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theory of how some aspect of the natural world works, testing that theory by observation and/or experiment, and then confirming, tweaking or discarding the theory depending on how well it matches up to the observable world.

The Big Bang

Back in the 1920s scientists, including a Catholic priest who was also an astronomer, proposed that the universe is expanding. This developed into the idea that the whole universe exploded out of a singularity which, for want of a better illustration, is like the whole universe exploding out of a full stop on this page. This developing theory has been strengthened with observations of how everything is moving away from everything else in the universe, detection of the predicted background radiation that would have been around after the Big Bang, and other factors predicted by the theory.

Evolution

This is the theory that all species of life have evolved from simpler lifeforms, particularly made famous by Charles Darwin in the mid 1800s. At its simplest, evolution involves the change in an inheritable characteristic of a lifeform which is then passed on to future generations. If this change gives the lifeform an advantage over others without it then it may become much more common in the lifeform through successive generations. For example, if a bird of prey develops an inheritable change that gives it better eyesight, then it will be better at catching prey and so will its chicks that inherit it, so the sharper-eyed bird of prey will have a better chance of survival than those without and so come to dominate. Developments in DNA, the coding in cells that determines how lifeforms develop, have added support to the theory of evolution, demonstrating a history of mutating DNA in the evolution of humans, and demonstrating the similarity between the vital parts of human DNA and other animals.

God & Science

Science cannot offer proof either for or against the existence of God, but rather offers an explanation of the way the universe works. Many Christians and people of other faiths see no conflict between science and their religion, rather accepting that science gives an insight into the way God's world works and the way God has brought it about. As the 17th century mathematician and astronomer Kepler, allegedly, once said: "Science is thinking God's thoughts after him"!

Nasty Parables

Jesus asks the teacher's question, 'What think ye?' and the four gospels give us plenty of examples of the disciples and opponents arguing, contradicting, moving the concept forward, blocking it, finding problems, letting the lesson sink in. The signs were there that think, they did.

I have a problem with the 'nasty' parables, ones from whose implications we recoil. Some are coercive and amoral. Nasty means nasty. They make me weep and gnash my teeth.

But can these become passages of value? I ask the parables two questions: 'what needs to happen to put things right?', and 'where does God's power lie, and with whom?'

A straightforward example comes in the account of the two servants who got into debt. The first owed the king a fortune, and the other owed his colleague a pittance. (Matt.18: 23ff). I try to find an alternative to the prolonged torture which, whatever one thinks of this, is unlikely to bring about debt repayment.

I retell the story for children in the 7-10 range using stuffed toys as the cast, and a laundry basket as the prison. The king is a man in a golden velvet robe, sitting on a couple of hymn books. The senior servant is a Miss Piggy lookalike -extravagantly draped in rings, necklaces, ear-rings etc. The junior servant is a scruffy teddy.

Scene 1: Miss P before the shocked and annoyed king; she wins him round and is let off.

Scene 2: She meets the teddy grabs him by the throat and starts on about his 50p debt. She send him to prison.

Scene 3: Fellow servants report this to the lord who is greatly peeved and sends Miss P to the laundry basket. 'What can be done?' we all ask.

Scene 4; the 2 prisoners start to get to know each other-share food, weep together, tell their side of the story etc. Miss P forgives the teddy, who goes home and tells his relieved mother. He then goes to the King and pleads for Miss P. She is released, and after some firm counselling, both are re-employed.

Have things come right? Well, they are in the process of doing so. Where did power lie? With the fellow servants who got involved when they saw injustice. With the sinners as they began to give and receive love from each other. Does this conclusion illustrate a core teaching of Jesus? I think it does.

A more complicated example comes in the account of the story of the talents. (Matthew 25 14-30)

If people are asked who does the Master of this story represent, many will answer, 'God'. Yet the Master is described as harsh, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter



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seed. Can this be the God of Psalms 103/104? No-where else in the Bible, as far as I can see, is God's character described in this way. Does it not better fit the economic reality of the day, where rich landowners lent money to poor farmers, then foreclosed when the harvest was ready - leaving the farmer no choice but to work for him as a slave or be hired by the day. Similar things have happened in living memory with unrealistic loans from banks.

The first two slaves, reluctantly no doubt, collude with the cynical charade of the Master. Tempted to see the money as owed to them, they nevertheless, as helpless people, manage to make a quick return - possibly not honestly? The third slave is going to give his portion back covered in mud, and with a blast of verbal abuse. In order to keep his integrity, he seems prepared to face the consequences.

How can things come right? What would you do?

I assume that the whole village is in dire poverty, full of sickness, malnutrition, petty theft, family break-up, and bitter resentment.

I suggest that the third servant might hold a party to which all would be invited, and to which all could contribute. Then set up a food bank with the money left over.

Now when the Master returns he is amazed to find the villagers welcoming him, and naming their babies after him. He might contrast their simple love with the lavish expense and patronising deceit he would have met in Rome.

Have things come right? Well, there might be a martyr if they haven't - but have one or two of the beatitudes been illustrated?

Where did power lie? What if the slave used his freedom not just to openly humiliate the tyrant, but, following the Covenant, in reckless love, did good to the poor and enabled the downtrodden to forgive?

Jesus needed to survive long enough to avoid being crucified before the message is out. This story with my modifications shows that the Law comes before the tyrant. Those who have ears to hear will 'get it'.

A story doesn't end when it says, 'The End'. It continues in the imagination and gets woven into bigger stories. Especially in a tyranny, and in an indifferent society, truth must be first veiled and then brought to life first in the story-teller, then in the hearers.

Local groups

Please contact group convenors or see the relevant PCN Britain web page for further details and to check when meetings restart. Newcomers are always welcome.

Abingdon Cliff Marshall
01235 530480 cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk

Currently we are meeting via Zoom. We recently discussed a sermon given by a friend for the Oxford Unitarian Chapel on the topic, Changed Values, Altered Priorities? We reflected on how the current health crisis may be changing our outlook as individuals and as society as a whole. Our July meeting gave us the opportunity to view and discuss the issues posed in the recently released Nathaniel's Story video. Everyone felt that they were supportive of HIV positive gay people and that our churches should be openly welcoming places for any and all people. We challenged ourselves to get our churches to do so. Our Aug meeting, via Zoom, will focus on the story of Greg, and that of Patrick and Davy, from the Made of Stories suite. If anyone would like to join us on Zoom please contact us. We look forward to being able to get together again when our normal group meetings will be at 7.30pm at St Michael's Church Room, Abingdon OX14 1DU on the first Monday of each month. All details will be on our webpage.

Brighton Sue Harrington
07943 401608 sue.harrington@pcnbritain.org.uk

Since the demise of Beyond Belief some of us have been attending the Thinking Aloud Allowed gatherings, which is now the new identity of the group. TAA meets on second Sun each month at Hove Methodist church, more recently, online. We are delighted that July's meeting welcomed Adrian Alker and the new PCN films (one or two of them). The online format seems to be popular and Zoom allows for splitting into smaller groups for discussion, which is proving valuable. Also on Zoom we are exploring the PCN's Living the Questions course to which members of our local churches have been invited. We are meeting fortnightly to give people time to prepare and digest between sessions. The attendees come from a broad spectrum— some have been

thinking progressively for some years, others are just stepping out and enquiring. Wherever we are on the journey this course is challenging and raises questions, many in addition to those posed by the course itself. We are indebted to the Rev Andy Lowe, Superintendent minister of the Brighton & Hove Methodist Circuit for setting up, hosting, and running the LtQ course.

Gloucestershire Andy Vivian
07966 985339 andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk

We lost a month in April due to the lockdown, but resurfaced again in May using Zoom. On that occasion only four of us stared across the ether and asked each other how we were coping. That number increased to nine the following month when we considered how the experience of lockdown had changed our feelings about going to church. To help us remember why progressive Christians bother with church we studied an article by Christine Whitworth in PV26 p.7. Christine gives six reasons why she still goes to church despite no longer holding with many of the central beliefs of traditional Christianity. Her reasons included a sense of belonging, solidarity with disadvantaged people, a need for encouragement to walk the walk not just talk the talk, and a wish to grow spiritually. On the whole we agreed that these all remained important to us and in fact the lockdown had underlined the importance of community and belonging. A few people said that growing spiritually could be difficult, especially when a congregation's evangelical wing becomes dominant. But we thought that a 'new normal' after lockdown might offer a chance to get permission to hold a progressive service once in a while. In May we had our first guest speaker via Zoom, which went well. David Goodban had recently returned from Hebron after three months as an observer monitoring the well-being of Palestinians living under Israeli military rule in the city. Zoom's 'share screen' facility meant he was able to show slides and key facts that we could all see. In Aug we will be discussing PCN's new 'Made of Stories' films. We may well continue with the films at our Sept meeting too. Then on Oct 3 we

will hear from a Shingon Buddhist about his faith and practice.

Newcastle Liz Temple
01207 505564 liz.temple@pcnbritain.org.uk

Having only recently become used to meeting in a new venue, we met again in June on another platform altogether: 'Zoom'! Although we were socially distant, the sight of familiar faces and mannerisms led to grins all round. Led ably by Liz, our convenor, we swapped tips and suggestions for making remote meetings as practicable, as audible and as enjoyable as possible. Not every member was present, however, so we considered how best to keep in touch during the summer before we can assemble again. It was proposed by Pat, and agreed by all, that engagement with issues arising from the current Black Lives Matter movement should be at the heart of our next zoom meeting. On 14 July (a good date for reckoning with *liberté, égalité, fraternité*), we will be thinking through 'Contemplation and Racism' along lines suggested by the meditations for June found on the Center for Action & Contemplation website. Many stimulating and fascinating themes for next year's monthly programme were discussed. For our Sept meeting, Jean will share her dramatic monologues on the impacts of Covid-19. Our speaker for the Oct meeting, Martyn Skinner, will offer short stories about NHS chaplaincy / spiritual care, with reflections after each and opportunity for discussion. We are looking forward to them both, and to learning from each of them some new perspectives on how to articulate the strange world in which we find ourselves today.

Oakham Peter Stribblehill
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We have been quiet since the start of lockdown in March. With the arrival of the films we are planning to reawaken the group and use them. Our plans are still being developed but the idea is that we have a preliminary meeting via zoom in July to catch up with each other and think about the films. We'll then have monthly meetings from Aug to discuss one film at each. Hopefully that will inspire us to move on to other material depending on the state of lockdown in the autumn. The newsletters have been very well received and it will be interesting to see how they develop.

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth
radpilgrims@gmail.com

We have kept in touch with each other every week during "lockdown" virtually on Thursday mornings. At first, we simply enjoyed seeing each other, finding out how we were coping (4 were self-isolating) and encouraging each other as we felt our way into a different way of living. After a few weeks, we introduced a topic, some based on issues relating to isolating, loneliness and the lack of physical contact. Recently we have been overtly theological considering such themes as "What does it mean to take Jesus' pre-Easter ministry seriously?", and "How do we experience the spiritual dimension of life?" Not all members can spend part of their day on-line with us, so from Sept 8, we will begin a series of extra monthly evening meetings. No definite title has been chosen yet but we may well be looking at some of PCN's new films. If anyone would like to join us online with a view to coming to our regular monthly Tuesday meetings when we can reconvene, please contact us.

West Yorks Michael Burn
07712620303 michael.burn@pcnbritain.org.uk

We were all saddened to hear of the death of Philip Carlin, a prominent member of our group. He had led a Bible study in February based on Jesus' visit to Nazareth, part of Church Action on Poverty's "Scripture from the Margins" and in Mar he was to have led a discussion on Rupert Shortt's "Outgrowing Dawkins: God For Grown Ups". Philip was widely read and we will miss his thoughtful contributions. We started meeting again via Zoom on 22 Jun when we were pleased to be led by Adrian Alker, Chair of PCN, who spoke of the imminent launch of the short films, "Made of Stories" before a discussion on how progressive Christianity could be presented to the modern world. Our meeting on 3 Aug will be led by Roy Squires. Roy will speak and lead a discussion on Mark Oakley's "The Collage of God". On 14 Sept we will see and discuss another of the films, having earlier in the year seen the Nathaniel story. If anyone would like to attend our Zoom meetings, please contact us.



Woking Fred Pink
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We finished Dominic Crossan's *Violence Divine* on the cusp of lockdown. His thoughts prompted some insightful discussions and most of us found it a very worthwhile video series. Then lockdown arrived and we turned to Zoom. After some email discussion we chose to explore the thoughts of Richard Rohr, Matthew Fox and Rupert Sheldrake. This was new territory for some of us and we are yet to dive into Rupert - morphic fields and resonance. It should be interesting and expose most of us to new concepts. We have, of course, no clear idea as to when we will meet together face to face. After a break for Aug - just in case anyone is going away - we will reconvene on our usual third Sat at 9.30am. We will probably watch the new films and expect that to take us into an understanding of spiritual lives that are outside our experience.

Letters

Head / Heart

I got to thinking that folk need something to hang their hat and coat on in life. The peg for them is theology. At the end of the day it's all cerebral. Whatever God is, and whoever we are is purely conceptual. I am now seventy seven and have tried to follow Jesus the best way I can. As a Reader I did my theology and to quote Thomas Aquinas; "I was once was a clever boy." The emphasis on "once was." The only thing I believe in is love.

Denis Malone

Judas: Agent or Tool

I was delighted to read Jeff Smith's thoughtful response to my piece on Judas. (PV33 p.10) My experience in discussing Judas is that people tend to come down on one of two sides - either God's agent (i.e. God planned it and Jesus knew all along and it was an essential element in the divine plan) or Satan's tool (i.e. even though God planned it and Jesus knew it all along, it was and is theologically and intellectually necessary to allow free will [and an understanding of human nature that encourages us to empathise with Judas] to put the divine narrative to the test). It might follow that the first position is generally taken by people

inside the faith tent, and the second by those outside it.

Also, many people would regard psychiatry and religious belief as awkward bed-fellows.

Stuart Hannabuss

Meaningful phrase

When reading PV33, a phrase sprang out and hit me. So much so that I am indebted to Ian Lovett for writing his Lockdown Thoughts p.6, in which he was encouraging us to look to a future beyond the lockdown. The phrase that really hit hard and made me stop reading was "The notion of God as a verb and not a noun, can open up a new horizon for spirituality." From my studies of grammar, I learned that a noun is a naming word for a person, place or thing and a verb is an action word or something one can do. I believe many of us have put God in the noun category as a majestic being, high and lifted up - and out of reach - when we should have been thinking of God as a verb, living and active in the hearts and minds of all people.

John McOwat

Want to reply? Have your own burning question? A comment on a recent event? Want to check whether a thought is unique to you? If so, please get in touch dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Advertising

If you frequent Facebook you may have noticed that PCN has been exploring boosting posts and advertising. These have been experiments, with varied results, with the aim of raising our profile on social media. www.facebook.com/pcnuk

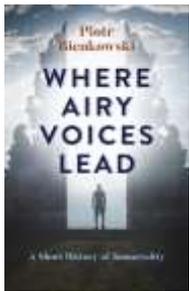
Build Back Better

www.buildbackbetteruk.org

The campaign for a recovery plan that builds back better. Let's not go back to normal. It's time for a new deal that protects public services, tackles inequality in our communities, provides secure well-paid jobs and creates a shockproof economy which can fight the climate crisis.

Reviews

Where Airy Voices Lead by Piotr Bienkowski, O Books



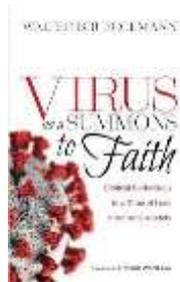
One reviewer describes this as the best currently available on the meaning of immortality and its interpreters through the ages. I am not qualified to comment on the

'best', however it is comprehensive and thorough in its research. Which is not surprising given the writer's deep and lengthy experience in this area and it is well laid out for the reader who does not share his enormous breadth of knowledge. Why read this book? One reason, as the author suggests, is because the reality is that the pursuit of immortality of one kind or another is an element in many cultures and religions. It is clearly of great significance to some individuals, and looms large in myth, legend and literature. Our attitude to death and immortality says much about our values and how we treat others with different perspectives, and about the worldviews that fuel those attitudes. He covers the subject by geography, timeframe, culture, by giants such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas; and by four major topics, Resurrection and the Immortal Soul, Transmigration and Transformation, Permanence and Legacy, and Reflections on Immortality. The structure makes this detailed exploration digestible, though it is best taken in parts rather than in one sitting. He does not intrude his own opinions, "As in most things to do with the subject of immortality, what any one person believes depends on their worldview, what assumptions they bring with them, and how they choose to prioritise and evaluate the evidence." He gives a comprehensive base of information against which to evaluate, maybe question, our own opinions on this subject.

Fred Pink

Virus as a summons to faith by Walter Brueggemann, Cascade Books

To publish on Covid-19 and its relation to faith within three months is impressive. To do so with Brueggemann's blend of OT scholarship and energetic hope for



the future is unexpected, but that is what is achieved in 71 pages. Not everyone will find the deep textual work easy, and some will regret the lack of NT reference, but

through thoughtful exploration of the Biblical context he wrestles positives from our plight.

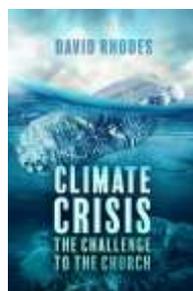
He examines 'pestilence' in the OT portrayal of the relationship between God and humanity, developing ideas such as Dangerous Holiness in an attempt to confront the realities of disease and suffering. He explores the place of pestilence in relation to prayer, mercy, the restoration of 'normal' and our view of the human predicament, both analysing Biblical texts in detail, and expounding critical and inspirational thinking. It becomes clear that the speed of production of the text was in part facilitated by the use of earlier pieces of writing, and once or twice it feels as though there is something of a struggle to incorporate these ideas. However, two of the most satisfying sections are the essay taking apart Psalm 77 as poetry (1983), which explores an imaginative shift beyond our own reasoning, and The Matrix of Groan (2001) metaphorically using the cry of pain to develop ideas of the new beginning and fresh start that Covid-19 may create.

Through his discussion of pestilence as an indictment he confronts directly political issues, providing a wakeup call to the excesses of consumerism, environmental exploitation, narcissism and greed. He challenges us to live with the pain of change. From what initially seemed a rather scholarly analysis, he has created an inspiring call to hopeful action.

Andrew Lancaster

Climate Crisis by David Rhodes, Kevin Mayhew

Rhodes is a former journalist and parish priest and has spent many years working alongside vulnerable and homeless people. He is a former director of the Bible Reading Fellowship and chaplain to the Children's Society. His first book, Faith



in Dark Places was well received and led on to media appearances, focusing on urban spirituality. You might be forgiven for thinking that he has turned his attention to grappling with the difficult theological questions arising out of the climate chaos across the globe. However, this is not so. Essentially the book is challenging the Church to regain, as its focus, the life and teachings of the historical Jesus rather than its preoccupation with internal religious concerns. Rhodes certainly wishes the worldwide Church with its 2 billion members to be stirred into action in averting the looming catastrophe. In order to do this, he argues that the Church needs to recalibrate the reason for its very existence. And what is that reason? The whole of the book, clearly indebted to the writings of Borg, Crossan and other progressive thinkers, is a re-emphasis on the need to recreate a just society, the elimination of hierarchical structures which impoverish the vast majority of the world's citizens, which create gender imbalance and obscure the radical love of God. Rhodes dashes through most of the landscape of NT theology from incarnation through to the parables and healings of Jesus, to the Cross, Resurrection and the place of Paul. None of this is new but is honestly pleaded by an author convinced that only by acting upon the radical invitation of Jesus to bring in God's kingdom of love and justice can we hope to tackle the world's biggest crisis.

My only disquiet is that the title of the book is deceptive if the reader is looking for any substantial discussion of the facts around climate change and the particular responses which the worldwide Church might make.

Adrian Alker

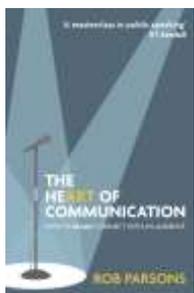
A warning. This isn't a book about climate change. It throws down a real challenge, but I was waiting for something which would address the climate crisis in a new way. What Climate Crisis does is present a clear and punchy re-examination of Christ's ministry and teaching by contextualising them within the social and political context of first century Palestine. Rhodes avoids being over scholarly by pursuing Christ as a journalist, investigating 'what's really going on' and he reaches conclusions that define Christ

fundamentally as a social rebel. This case is not new of course, being part of the quest for the historical Jesus which has flourished during the last 50 years. He dynamically lays out this perspective, and incorporates feminist views in his analysis. He develops then a forceful case against Paul, who he argues distorted the original message of Christ, moulding Christianity into a religion of compliance, supporting the establishment instead of promoting core teachings of radical change and social justice. This works well as an introduction to the historical Christ. It gets caught up in 'proving' the resurrection, and which gospel material is 'fake' or 'reliable', but the case is clear - Christ set out to confront injustices in his society, and the Church has 'buried him under a mountain of religion, (and by) blinding us to his message of love and liberation... the Church is guilty of a ... denial by its conspiracy of silence.'

The climate crisis cannot be denied, and the Church should be taking a lead here. Rhodes clearly hopes that a radical theological base will free the church for action. But without a more purposeful direction on what it must do, disputing the theology feels a little like fiddling while Rome (literally) burns.

Andrew Lancaster

The HeART of Communication by Rob Parsons, Hodder



In this small, very readable volume, Rob Parsons gives what R T Kendall describes as 'A masterclass in public speaking'. Drawing on 50 years of experience in public speaking

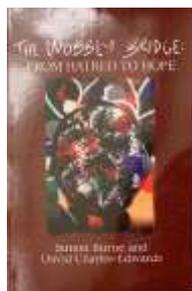
the writer presents a potpourri of ideas on how to communicate and connect more effectively. Drawing on Aristotle's art of debating, speakers are challenged on their personal ethos, logos and pathos – or credibility, logic and passion. They are encouraged to be teachable and willing to develop their craft. The writer demonstrates how speakers can engage the audience on a practical, intellectual, and emotional level by knowing, observing and relating inclusively with that audience. Practical tips tackle issues that can make or break delivery of the

message. These include managing distractions, effective seating layout and good use of sound systems. He shows that these are applicable from Sunday School to conferences. The book is peppered with anecdotes and illustrations of good and bad approaches. Memorable pithy quotes remind the reader why better public speaking matters. A checklist summarises each chapter making it easy to apply. This could all feel daunting to new speakers. However, he makes it accessible to everyone and applicable by anyone. The first chapter is entitled, 'Find one thing that makes a difference'. Preachers, teachers, speakers in any context and with any level of experience may well find this to be the one thing that makes a difference to their public speaking skills.

This book is really about the audience. If what is being said is worth saying then it must be worth hearing. This is a manual on how to be heard by the head and the heart.

Meryl White

The Wobbly Bridge by Simon Burne and David Charles-Edwards, Glass Darkly



Recently there has been an encouraging amount of attention given to interfaith relations, encouraging people of faith to focus on what unites rather than divides us.

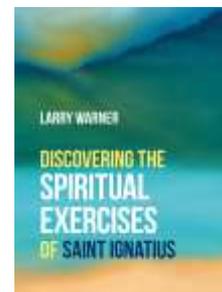
However, the same cannot be said for relations between theists and atheists, which are as volatile as ever. Simon Burne and the late David Charles-Edwards, who identify as 'freelance theists', wrote this in order to "explore the common ground between faiths and between faiths and atheism".

There are chapters on abstract, philosophical matters such as the nature of God, the definition of truth and life after death. For each of these, the authors collate teachings from various world religions and secular philosophies, inviting the reader to essentially build their own belief system. The language metaphor from chapter 10 is helpful: we all have a mother tongue, our 'heart language', but that does not mean we cannot appreciate other languages and incorporate elements of their vocabulary into our own

parlance. The same can be done with religious doctrines. Equally interesting are the chapters on practical matters such as climate change and wealth inequality. Crises of planet-wide magnitude can only be solved if people of all faiths and none work together towards a common goal. Ultimately, the one thing all systems can agree on is the value of love and compassion; most religions have some variation of the golden rule, and secular systems have the Charter for Compassion. We are more similar than we realise. Overall, the authors do an excellent job of synthesising different belief systems without compromising their own convictions. The Wobbly Bridge proves it is possible to "disagree without disagreeing disagreeably".

Erin Burnett

Discovering the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius by Larry Warner, BRF



Warner teaches at a conservative evangelical seminary in the US and the book results from his experience of leading people from outside the Catholic tradition

through a contemporary form of the exercises of Saint Ignatius. They are not 'for spectators but for those seeking something deeper ... growth, conformity to Christ, and union with God'. He offers his own 'functional equivalents' to the original text, provides questions and breathing exercises to aid meditation, and encourages journalling by those who follow his programme. Warner is clear in explaining 'imaginative prayer' which Ignatius instructed people to use to see, smell, taste, touch and hear the gospel stories. The introduction attracted me to seriously consider taking up the journey with him, but Warner then asks 12 questions to help readers discern if this is right for them. One seemed affirming for a progressive: those who follow his path through the exercises should be 'open to having their theology and image of Jesus challenged'. But he then appears to demand a literal belief in Adam and Eve, in angels, in the Evil One, in Hell, and that 'Jesus died for you'. And finally: 'choosing to reject the life and love God offers through

Jesus is to condemn oneself to hell for all eternity'. There is no suggestion here that the scriptures contain metaphors and pointers to spiritual truths to be discovered by each person. Those who teach the Exercises from within the Jesuit tradition at St Bueno's and other places encourage retreatants to find their own way and make the Exercises a spur to engaging with much more, with issues of justice and working for God's kingdom. The book provides methods, techniques and a path to Christian formation but it will not be one for most readers of this journal.

Peter Varney

Seeking Paradise by Stephen Lingwood, Lindsey Press.



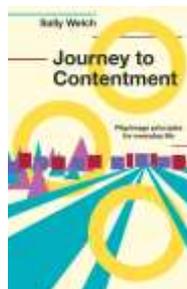
I knew little about Unitarianism, except the impression of it being a small sect on the periphery of the Christian Church. This book has done much to improve my understanding.

Unitarians, like all Christian groups, are facing the challenge of a declining membership. To respond to this, the author, a Unitarian minister, considers it important to define its mission. He is committed to what he describes as classical Unitarianism which sees the "fatherhood of God" and the "leadership" of Jesus as important. He outlines the history of Unitarianism and discusses revelation, salvation, the search for faith and truth, pluralism and the Kingdom of God. He acknowledges that the "kingdom of God", as he prefers to call it, is mysterious and cannot be defined but can be found in the actions and teachings of Jesus. He goes on to argue that this can best be symbolised by the term "paradise" which is less political and "softer and gentler". He suggests the Unitarian mission should be to discover and work to create "paradise" and its evangelism should be honest and truthful reflecting the principles of liberal evangelism. This book is written for British Unitarians and, as the author makes clear, it is a work of theology with each chapter concluding with questions for reflection and discussion. It is difficult to do it justice in a short review as it is thought-provoking and raises issues of relevance to the whole of the Church. For example, the author

challenges us with the question of why a church should wish to grow. Is the answer to survive? But why is the survival of Unitarianism [or any other Christian denomination] a good thing? If they become extinct in the 21st century, would the world care? Lingwood sets out to answer this in respect of his denomination – perhaps we all need to do the same!

Nigel Bastin

Journey to Contentment by Sally Welch, BRF



Welch is a vicar, diocesan spirituality adviser, lecturer and writer. Drawing on her experience of leading pilgrimages she sets out to accompany readers on a 'Journey to Contentment'. The

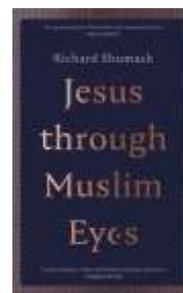
book has 52 sections: Bible reading, thought, and creative, prayerful, spiritual exercise. Moving through preparation, beginning the journey, finding a rhythm, dangers of discontentment, it leads to staying on the path. Contentment is not achieved. The writer's hope is that the process will set structures, disciplines and practices in place to enable the continued quest. Welch suggests a daily pace but recognises that some sections may take longer. Establishing life patterns takes time. She recognises that the exercises may not suit everybody and suggests readers select what is most helpful. Journalling is assumed but not explained.

She asserts leadership credentials through doing the preparation, research and reflection needed. However, there are many sweeping statements, "we all ...", "research has shown that ...". No references are given and quotes are cited without acknowledging the sources. The book puzzles me. It feels more like direction than accompaniment. It offers a spiritual journey with somewhat traditional theology. Who it is aimed at? Who would I recommend it to? Does it achieve its aim? Would missing the exercises, as suggested, shortcut the journey? Could the rhythms and practices still be set in place? I don't know. The exercises are creative and could be useful in other settings. Practical preparation suggestions such as starting a journal and having access to creative materials, would have been helpful.

It could work as a weekly small group resource, for people wanting to journey to contentment together. If planning to do the exercises though, do make sure you are well equipped with 'sticky tape and string'!

Meryl White

Jesus through Muslim Eyes by Richard Shumack, SPCK



Shumack has done meticulous research in the Qur'an, the Hadith and a range of other Islamic literature both ancient and modern. He makes a real attempt to 'get inside' Islam and

understand it on its own terms. For this reviewer at least, his book is very informative and stimulating. A significant part of it is devoted to discussion of the thesis of the modern liberal Muslim writer, Mustafa Akyol. In his book *The Islamic Jesus* (St Martin's, New York, 2017), Akyol suggests that the Muslim Jesus is identical with the Jesus of primitive Jewish Christianity, which saw him as a prophet and Messiah but not as the incarnation of God. Recognising this, he says, could be the basis of a closer devotional rapprochement between our two faiths, as we realise that we worship the same God and follow the same Jesus.

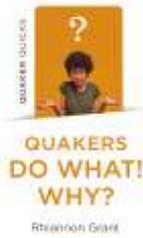
Shumack critiques this thesis on quite reasonable historical grounds, but it is when he comes to critique it theologically that this book shows itself to be 'a game of two halves'. It becomes apparent that he is a conservative evangelical, taking Old Testament prophecies very literally and quoting the New Testament as straightforward evidence of what the apostles said about Jesus and of how Jesus saw himself.

Most would agree that Christianity and Islam are fundamentally two quite different religions. However, even here Shumack seems to have missed the point. In concentrating on a simplistic view of original sin and the atonement, he misses most of the rich depth and paradox of the real difference.

The book is divided into four parts. I would recommend a reading of the first two parts, but found myself becoming increasingly disappointed about halfway through the third.

Ray Vincent

Quakers Do What! Why by Rhiannon Grant, Christian Alternative

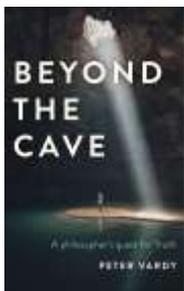


This brief but informative book is an excellent introduction to modern Quaker beliefs and practices, aimed at people who know very little about Quakerism other

than the fact that they worship in silence. Grant does a good job explaining the jargon and procedures involved, as well as a step-by-step description of what to expect at a Quaker meeting for worship. It outlines what makes Quakers distinct from 'mainline' denominations, such as rejection of creeds, outward sacraments and professional clergy. I found the chapter about God most interesting. The tradition demonstrates how those with radically different ideas about God can still worship together – this even includes non-theists. Grant takes a diplomatic approach to hot-button issues like same sex marriage, making her own views quite clear while acknowledging the wide spectrum held by Quakers. Every chapter comes with the caveat that if you asked six different Quakers about the topic in question, you'd probably get six different answers. Turns out there's only one thing all Quakers can universally agree upon: they have absolutely nothing to do with Quaker Oats!

Erin Burnett

Beyond the Cave by Peter Vardy, IFF Books



I watched as Trump lambasted journalists and scientists alike for the 'false news' of the spread of the virus whilst suggesting that the population inject themselves with

disinfectant in the presence, and to the clear horror, of his medical expert. In daily life we face the question 'is this true?' and ask what we should do with our conclusions. The tragic and unnecessary death of George Foreman brought again the indisputable truth that 'Black Lives Matter'. So when I saw the title of this book I was curious.

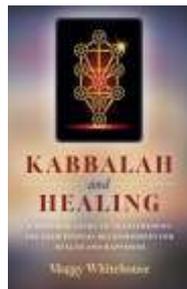
Vardy is an acclaimed Philosopher of Religion and a passionate educator. His work's mission is to help us think with more clarity about many of the issues where emotion or received opinions hold sway. He describes how we live in a 'post-truth' age, to our cost. Our postmodern race towards relativism has included, inter alia, on the one hand the decline of what was once religious certainty and, at the same time, the rise of fundamentalism with its insistence that only its truth has any validity. Vardy argues, both in detail and with passion, that whilst claims to Absolute Truth are deeply eroded they are necessary for its and our wellbeing. Humans, he argues, have the potential to discover and create beauty and wonder and yet we, religions included, collude with society in all its fussy obsessions and mediocrities.

There is hope in his analysis. 'Truth' he claims, will survive the 'post-truth' society in which it lives. This is because truth is grounded not in the media but in the 'Eternal'. This means, as a starter, that we can choose to question the words of the media, and even of Presidents. We can choose to live lives of integrity - rooted in justice, compassion, humility, love and mercy in the knowledge that there is hope and meaning beyond the trivia and received wisdom of our culture. 'Truth' he says, 'matters'.

I am no philosopher and I did not find this an easy read. The challenge is to question society's assumptions and to seek to fulfil and allow others to fulfil the human potential that we all share. That works for me as a progressive Christian.

Christine King

Kabbalah and Healing by Maggie Whitehouse, O Books



When I receive a book to review I make myself, in spite of a strong temptation, abstain from reading the reviews the publisher includes. It was particularly challenging this time because I know little about the Kabbalah and had no expectations of what this book might contain. I struggled at first, but as I progressed, it began to make sense to me. The Kabbalah, as far as I understand it, is an esoteric and

mystical wisdom tradition and is taught orally, renewed through subsequent generations. Its purpose is to lead the initiate to God in a new and intimate way. I also knew that there is a considerable 'New Age' interest in the tradition.

This book breaks a number of taboos. It is written, for a start, by a woman, and one who is from a Christian not a Jewish tradition, and it aims to be far from esoteric. It is from the pen of someone who is clearly a remarkable person, a teacher of the Kabbalah, a journalist, broadcaster and comedian, as well as author of eighteen books on spirituality. I found the concepts interesting, appealing and, mostly, accessible. When I looked at the reviews I saw that Richard Rohr was amongst their number and this makes great sense. He warmly welcomes her offering to her readers: to heal our relationships with God, ourselves, each other and our planet. She came to the Kabbalah through a variety of emotional and health challenges and writes with a passion to share the healing she has experienced through her highly detailed guide to the implementation of this mystical tradition and her understanding of it.

Christine King

Wells of Thought by Rosemary May Wells

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£7.50 inc. p&p

This slim book of reflections on life and faith delighted me. It came to me when I was feeling low in lockdown: I found it "balm in Gilead".

I am not one for much poetry, nor take literally many of the gospel stories. However, these lines come at some gospel stories from an acute angle. Rather like an Ignatian meditation, she shows us incidents from the perspective of the onlooker, not the main character. We are given imaginative and sensitive insights into their thoughts, feelings, and sometimes bewilderment.

There are lines to ponder, to savour, to stimulate, sometimes amuse with an element of whimsy, certainly to enter deeply into an understanding of long-familiar stories.

I find much to prompt my exploration of that silence which feeds the soul, and energises the resources of love, compassion, and service.

It is a book to dip into, to open up channels of spiritual nourishment.

Michael Wright

made of stories

Short films with big challenges for
religious faith

<https://madeofstories.uk>



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**

