

Progressive Voices

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GODD



Mar 2023, PV44

Crucifiers?

Unresisting, suffering God,
as we travel through Lent and Passion time,
hearing again those ancient stories,
lead us to understand more deeply
the costliness of the journey to the cross,
Help us to realise our part
in the infliction of pain,
humiliation and rejection,
not on the suffering Palestinian Jesus of long ago
but on the ever-present body of his followers today.

Every time we refuse to listen,
utter unforgiving words,
take umbrage,
harbour misunderstandings,
bear grudges,
retreat from trying to make peace
it is as if we are participating
with the crowds shouting, 'Crucify!'
inflicting humiliation by spitting in a face,
gathering thorns for the mockery of a crown,
or even hammering in the nails.

Crucified God,
strengthen us to allow our own hurt,
anger, resentment, fear,
to subside
and enable us to open our inner selves
to the transforming energy
of your ever-present Spirit
as we recall the words of Jesus,
that anything we do, or fail to do
for the least of his people,
is as if done, or neglected for him.
Enable us to work together
to build up the body of Jesus on earth,
not crucify him again.
Jesus on earth,
not crucify him again.

Ros Murphy

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Welcome

We progressives are always ready and waiting to discuss God, and in this issue we indulge that predilection. We'll explore belief, intent, origins, and relationship. Whilst our thoughts on the divine are plentiful, we do struggle when it comes to practical examples of living out a progressive approach to life and faith. So I would encourage future contributors to reflect on this and look to the other seven of our 8 points for inspiration - and we definitely need more material as my reserves of copy are dwindling. (Alongside articles, poetry, prose, images, etc. are also very welcome.)

Elsewhere we reflect on our new King, a traditional service, homophobia, the Beatitudes, discovering PCN, community outreach, and poetry, quotes and reflections to ponder and inspire.

Welcome to the 44th edition of PV.

Enjoy!



Progressive Christianity Network Britain

www.pcnbritain.org.uk
www.facebook.com/pcnuk/

Trustees

Adrian Alker
adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Martin Bassant
martin.bassant@pcnbritain.org.uk

Dave Coaker, editor of Progressive Voices
dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Simon Cross, Chair
simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk

Ian Geere
ian.geere@pcnbritain.org.uk

Sandra Griffiths, Honorary Secretary
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk

Sue Hobbly
sue.hobbly@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jenny Jacobs
jenny.jacobs@pcnbritain.org.uk

Naomi Nixon
naomi@movement.org.uk

Paul Onslow
paul.onslow@pcnbritain.org.uk

Tony Sanchez
tony.sanchez@pcnbritain.org.uk

Peter Stribblehill, Treasurer
peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jackie Wiegman, vice Chair
jackie.wiegman@pcnbritain.org.uk

Gwen Wills
gwen.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

Staff

Sarah Guilfoyle, administrator and assistant web editor
sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk

Pete Eveleigh, Web host

Janis Knox, Social Media Editor
janis.knox@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jess Lee, DVD Librarian
jess.lee@pcnbritain.org.uk



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dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

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Contact us:
01594 516528 info@pcnbritain.org.uk
PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB.
Further information, including details of publications and conferences:
www.pcnbritain.org.uk
www.facebook.com/pcnuk/

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Chair's Letter

Dear friends, first of all let me say thanks to Dave Coaker, the PCN Trustee who edits this magazine. Dave works very hard to ensure that this magazine is a space where views and ideas can be aired and exchanged – and delicately navigates the balancing act that this requires.

When I read the magazine, just like when I speak to individual PCN members and groups, I'm consistently impressed, sometimes challenged, and occasionally even surprised by the range of views and perspectives on all kinds of things to be found within and around our network. Even in the small group of PCN trustees (see below) there are some quite diverse ideas about all kinds of things. It's part of the beauty of our network that not only is there room for people who hold quite different views on important issues, but that there's also room for opinions to change over time.

Change, I'm fond of saying to anyone who will listen, is the only constant. Everything is in a process of change, that's true, I think, at all levels. History seems to bear this out, as does science, sometimes it feels like it's only religion that holds out against this fundamental truth.

It seems increasingly vital that as a network we foster the sort of space where people can change their views, where they can be exposed to different perspectives and ideas (or old ones for that matter) in a safe and welcoming environment. It's important too that we create and hold the kind of space that allows genuine and sensitive discussion of things that inspire and trouble us. When I first joined a PCN group that was what so encouraged me – that there was space for generous discussion and respectful disagreement.

I've already used the word 'safe' in this letter, and I do think it's important that people feel safe to speak their truth and offer their perspectives. The current appeal for 'safe spaces', though, can be problematic in some ways – safety for one person often boils down to the exclusion of another, or a refusal to hear their point of view. It's true to say, I think, that not all points of view are equally valid. Some hold



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Simon Cross serves as the
Chair of PCN Britain.
simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk



see change in action here as not just we as a network, or the wider Church, but society as a whole wrestles with the tensions that this sort of issue poses.

I know that within different PCN groups (and in other places too) this same sort of issue is being negotiated in different ways among people who respect one another and value each other's perspective and experience. Again, where we've fostered this attitude of trust and respect amongst us we can hope to do this with sensitivity and with appropriate regard for the feelings and concerns of one another. We're all learning as we go along, we're all changing as we go along – and that's the natural way of things.

Content Creators group

We're actively recruiting creative, thoughtful or curious PCN members to join a new 'content creators' group to help us to develop a wide range of helpful and interesting things to share on our website, social media, and other communication channels. We're keen to find people who can write articles and blogs, perhaps, or folk who write poems, prayers or liturgies. It won't be a huge commitment; we're hoping to build a big enough group to create a range of content between us. I'm really keen to hear from anyone who thinks that they might be able to contribute to this – or maybe you know someone else who you would recommend... let me know!

Trustee volunteers

On the subject of commitment: is it your time to join our team of trustees? We're keen to hear from anyone who feels ready to join our volunteer group to help with the day to day running of the network. We don't just need people with a range of professional expertise (although event planners and accountants are always welcome) but we need people with a range of life experiences. People from different cultures and walks of life, people who understand different parts of the church, we need those who have been around for ages and the people who are in their first year of membership. Most of all you will need to have the energy and appetite to commit to helping us manage, and even steer, the process of change within the network. If you would like to hear more about what it might mean for you to be a PCN trustee, please contact me or any of the trustees team to chat about it.

Faith or The Faith?

In our increasingly multicultural world, I know from friends in India and other lands that to have Rishi Sunak emerging as our PM in the UK, has made a positive impact on many hearts, internationally as well as here. I write this as a non-Conservative.

However, as well as being of Indian heritage, Rishi Sunak is a Hindu. At the moment of his official accession as King, Charles stated his constitutional responsibility as 'Defender of the Faith'. As a younger man, he had suggested he would prefer to be seen as a more-inclusive 'defender of faith'. So, I'm sure he is comfortable with the UK having a PM from a non-Christian faith.

But, the word 'Faith' itself can be thought of from a too limited perspective. I was struck some years ago listening to Jonathan Sacks (former Chief Rabbi), quoting Timothy Ferris who wrote in 'The Whole Shebang': *'All who genuinely seek to learn, whether atheist or believer, scientist or mystic, are united in having not a faith, but faith itself.'* That puts an emphasis on 'trust' rather than 'belief'. With this understanding, faith is something that transcends religions and other belief allegiances.

The religious profile of people has changed substantially in the past few decades. In 2017, the British Social Attitudes Survey for England and Wales found that: 'Among 18–24-year-olds, the answer 'none' (no religion) was given by 71%, compared with 27% of those of 75 years or over.' An almost complete reversal.

Yet, many from all generations share values like integrity, compassion, environmental sustainability, and the desire to treat each other well. So, what is it that is being rejected by the younger people identified in the survey? It helps to think beyond our personal bubbles. I suspect that a major problem is



Howard Grace is a member of the Newbury PCN group, he is a teacher, and executive producer of the film 'Beyond Forgiving'.

the unconscious bias, which all of us have picked up along the way, that equates 'faith' to Christian or religious belief. This then recalls doctrinal religion, and associated concepts.

I asked one of my younger friends how she sees 'faith'. She replied, 'As a "non-believer" I am uneasy with the word, as it is so closely tied to the connotations of organised religion. To me, spirituality is about connecting to something greater than the self. There is a sense of driving purpose and a concept of shared humanity - that we are all connected in a global ecosystem and we each bring something beautiful and valuable to that rich tapestry. This spiritual sense, alongside with my driving value of servant leadership, allows me to make morally-conscious choices that I believe would reflect the same teachings as a great many religious texts.'

Over the last few decades, a lot of 'interfaith' work has developed in the UK. Might the next move forward be to see 'believers' vs 'non-believers' as a false dividing line, and explore the more fundamental bridge between the two? Such an exploration would look at the heart rather than at the head. My hope is that the new monarch and his successors can foster an encompassing worldview of faith, one that transcends 'beliefs'. Whatever our political views, may the appointment of our new PM prove to be a step towards fostering a spirit of our shared humanity.

A Limerick Bible?

When Adam and Eve wanted more
From their idyllic garden décor,
They bit on the apple
And then had to grapple
With tackle unnoticed before.

Now Moses with God was quite matey
But rules writ on rocks were so great, he
Found coming down Sinai,
The burden was sky-high
And most people found them too weighty.

Jewish writers were good storytellers
And Bibles are always best sellers,
Though sometimes the midrash
Makes things seem a bit rash,
As if we were fantasy dwellers.

Though he tried to abide by his calling,
There were times when St Paul was appalling
And some of his thought
On what should be taught
Could have done with some good overhauling.

Chris Avis

Methodist Covenant Service

It's one of those Marmite things – you either love it or hate it. That's how I think many Methodists feel about our annual Covenant Service. This usually takes place early in the new year, and this year all eleven Methodist churches in our circuit joined together for this auspicious event. The service was led by our Chair of District (who is also our acting Superintendent) and we were honoured to welcome the Vice President of the Methodist Conference as our preacher. As a Methodist minister, albeit retired, I felt obliged to attend – but I must add, for all the wrong reasons. I confess I attended not to 'renew my covenant with God' but to be seen to be there, and also so as not to cause my daughter any embarrassment should any comments be made about her mother's non-attendance. (She is a part time minister in the circuit.)

You will have guessed that unlike Marmite, which I love, the Methodist Covenant service is not my cup of tea. As I have said, this service is the occasion when we Methodists 'renew our covenant with God', so straight away that needs a bit of unpacking. But to give you a flavour the covenant prayer goes like this:

'I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you place me, in all that I do, and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace.

Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things and when I have nothing.

I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever. Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven.'

This follows a time of confessional prayer at the end of which I felt like a miserable worthless sinner.

The sentiment of the Covenant Service is about giving all of yourself to God, giving yourself to suffering and being laid aside. It's about being a sinful creature but being forgiven by a merciful God. As someone pointed out, if you had that sort of relationship with another person it would be considered coercive control, abuse.

So, what sort of God do we believe in? Or more to the point, what sort of God would you need to believe in to make the words of the covenant service your own? One of my favourite verses in the whole Bible is John 10:10 (Jesus said) 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'



Gwen Wills is a retired Methodist minister and is a PCN trustee.
gwen.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

I find the words of the covenant service life diminishing, not life enhancing. The late and much lamented John Shelby Spong wrote 'The essence of life is discovered when one is free to give life away, that love is known in the act of loving, and that the call of human life is to be all that each of us can be and then to be an agent of empowering others to be all that they can be.' This is surely about being free, loving freely, not about covenants and agreements. And to finish, I should mention that our Chair of District, very graciously and lovingly, did say that we shouldn't feel obliged to join in with the covenant prayer if we felt uncomfortable in so doing, and the Vice President of the Methodist Conference delivered a topical and interesting sermon. So despite all, I was glad I attended!

AGM

Our Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday 1st April at Ruislip Manor Methodist Church, HA4 0AS. Details to follow.
01594 516528 www.pcnbritain.org.uk

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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, £45 donor option) Receive 4 copies of PV each year, advance notice of events, reduced event fees, along with support and encouragement.

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Imagined teachings of Jesus

On Prayer

John 8:6

One day, on the Sabbath, Jesus and his disciples were walking through Capernaum and came to the synagogue where a group of Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were praying loudly and demonstratively. Some of them were kneeling, others had their hands stretched up to the sky and many people came to watch them.

Jesus walked towards the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law and, bending down, began to write in the dust. Slowly they became aware of Jesus and what he was doing and their prayers came to an end.

The most senior Pharisee, recognising Jesus, stepped forward. "It dishonours God to disturb a man in prayer. Surely one such as yourself, who claims to speak as a prophet speaks, knows this?"

Jesus finished what he was writing in the dust, stood up and turned towards the Pharisee.

"Surely the prayers of one such as yourself, who holds the very scrolls of Israel, would not be disturbed by a poor man writing in the dust?"

For a moment the Pharisee remained silent. "You are clever with your words Jesus of Nazareth, but God desires prayer, not wit."

"You are right that God desires prayer" said Jesus. "But I see no prayer here, only a performance fit for a stage! You and your followers are like the male lizards in the desert when it comes to mating season. They stand on their hind legs and swing their tails for all to see."

At this the Pharisee became considerably agitated. "How dare you insult God's chosen elect!", and he looked around for how he might remove Jesus from the synagogue. However, he could see in the eyes



Robin Drummond
works in education, lives near Reading with his wife and two boys and attends the Galilee group.

of the crowd that they did not share his indignation, so he and the other Pharisees and Teachers of the Law withdrew inside.

Jesus turned towards the crowd. "Friends, truly I tell you, do not be impressed by the prayers of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. They say much but mean little. But I tell you, say little and mean much. Indeed, sometimes the most powerful prayers are those for which you cannot even find the words."

A young girl in the crowd stepped forward and looked at the ground around Jesus' feet. "Teacher, what did you write in the dust?"

Jesus beckoned her to him and, looking at her parents, asked "Can she read?"

"No Rabbi, we cannot afford to send her to school. Instead she helps us in the fields" the father replied.

Jesus gave the girl a stick and, taking her hand in his own, traced over what he had written. The moment they finished, the young girl shouted, "Prayer is the breath of the soul!"

The crowd were amazed that the girl had read what Jesus had written, and she returned to her parents with a wild smile on her face.

"I tell you the truth, you are amazed that this girl who cannot read has read these words, but more important are the words themselves. Prayer is not just another thing to do, like making a bed or catching a fish. To think of prayer as another thing to do is as mistaken as thinking of God as another being that exists. Both are much, much more."

A man in the crowd called out, "Jesus, teach us about prayer. What does it mean to say prayer is the breath of the soul?"

Jesus answered, "Consider how free our breath is. There are no rules about when and how to breathe. There are no experts who show us how it is done. And consider how important our breath is. Without it one would perish in seconds; it is more precious than even food or water."

Jesus paused for a moment. "So too with prayer. There are no rules and there are no experts, despite the theatrical displays of those that profit from claiming otherwise. Prayer is as free and as natural as our breath, and it is also as important. Without prayer the soul quickly begins to perish. That is why I say that prayer is the breath of the soul."

Do You Believe in God?

I suspect that many would assume that a belief in God is an essential component of a Christian faith. It seems, however, that hardly a week goes by without someone in the public eye announcing that they do not believe in God, or that they are an Atheist. I often seem to find myself inwardly asking, "I wonder exactly what it is they do not believe in?" If that is a legitimate question, then should I not be prepared also to ask the corollary - "in what do those who profess a belief in God actually believe?"

Accepting the existence of "God" presents me with no particular difficulty, since "God" exists as a word in the English vocabulary. Like other words, which I accept exist, it comprises, when written or typed, a linear sequence of symbols (letters) forming code for a plurality of possible meanings (I counted eight against the noun in my favoured dictionary) each comprising other codes (words) having their own meanings or sets of meanings, also expressed in code, and so on. The English language did not fall miraculously from the sky, metaphorically speaking; it is the result of centuries of human thought, it has evolved and indeed is still evolving. New words often appear as a consequence of new technologies (information technology, and aeronautics, for example) while existing words can fall out of use or be given new meanings ("gay" being an obvious, oft-quoted example). It also appears that "thought", a necessary prelude to linguistic expression, I would suggest, could be understood in terms of brain activity involving neurons releasing chemicals, known as neurotransmitters, which generate electrical signals in neighbouring neurons, leading to thought formation. This suggests that the term, "God", could be understood as code for particular biological processes, involving neurons and neurotransmitters, and that "God" therefore also has existence in the physical progress and consequences of these processes.

What meaning then do people, who claim not to believe in "God", have in mind? Perhaps those, with a scientific bent, are thinking of an "intelligent creator", when they announce their lack of belief, yet I also have no particular difficulty in accepting the existence of this type of entity, although I would not use the term "God" to label (encode) it. In processing the information supplied to human brains by various sense organs, I would suggest, frameworks of perception and understanding are created all the time, and are readily communicated by means of biological equipment, involving muscles controlled by nervous impulses generated by human brains. Often non-biological equipment (pens, pencils keyboards, microphones, optical or electronic data transmission and data storage devices etc.) are subsequently utilised to extend the



Chris Vosper is a retired Senior Patent Examiner (mainly in aerospace), a Methodist (progressive) and is married with grandchildren.

range or permanence of the communication. I would suggest that all this information processing and communication involves, in one way or another, human intellect, human-created languages, human-devised protocols and, often, human devised and constructed physical equipment. Notwithstanding the origin of the phenomena to which they refer, words such as "Universe", "Galaxy", "Star", "Planet", "Matter", "Atom", "Proton", "Neutron", "Electron", "Quark" result from human, creative intelligence, as do the words "Intelligence" and "Creation" themselves. Therefore, any shared understanding is dependent upon intelligent human creation. The world is full of intelligent creators it seems.

Some may seek to clarify the meaning of "God" by the attribution of "supernatural" properties, the distinction between atheist and believer depending upon a belief, or otherwise, in the "supernatural". I however run into difficulty straight away with this approach. I would have to conclude that the word "supernatural" itself is a human creation, arrived at using "natural" biological equipment, and so would any other words we might use to clarify its meaning. Then, assuming humans to be "natural" entities, as is strongly suggested by the apparent need for us to ingest "natural" matter (food/drink) and utilise "natural" energy contained therein, in order to progress from a fertilised egg to a sentient being and be sustained as such, we are seemingly not equipped to discern anything without involvement of "natural" processes. Historical evidence (e.g. that pertaining to scientific progress) suggests that there is a continuously moving boundary between what we know and what we do not know. There is however no evidence, in my opinion, to suggest we have ever been in a position objectively to distinguish between the "natural" and anything else. Even speculative, imaginary thought, seems to be a "natural" phenomenon. "Supernatural" does not just imply the "unknown" but also the "unknowable", since knowledge appears to depend upon natural processes. If what constitutes the realm of the "supernatural" is indeterminate, how can the boundary between "natural" and "supernatural" ever be described objectively? How can (naturally) imagined supernatural realms ever be distinguished from (naturally produced) fantasy? The meaning of "supernatural" is further obscured by a record of human beings apparently having regarded certain

perceived phenomena (thunder, lightning, earthquakes, rainbows) as being of “supernatural” origin, only for subsequent generations to proffer “natural” explanations. Human beings still seem to be heavily engaged in exploring the



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natural realm, using “natural” techniques and equipment, so are no way near being in a position objectively to state that “nature” has a describable boundary, let alone what might lie beyond it.

In Christian circles, of course, we are used to referring to God in terms of “Father”, “Son” and “Holy Spirit”. It may be intended metaphorically but I do not think it unreasonable for people (at least the uninitiated) to ask the question “how can a father be his own son, and what on earth is meant by “holy spirit”? My favoured dictionary, seems to suggest that “holy” is commonly used to denote subjective human perceptions / judgments of perfection and purity, mere association (by humans) with the term “God” or “gods”, or human emotional reaction (e.g. awe). Against the term, “spirit” are too many potential meanings to give detailed consideration to, here. The Bible yields a host of other ideas about God but these ideas cannot be recorded or expressed without resort to human code, the use of human intellect, and reliance on human biology. Further, ideas do not exist in a vacuum but in the context of other ideas, contributing to human experience at particular points in time. Thus the demands on a God capable of creating an earth and surrounding firmament, as perceived in the Old Testament, are dwarfed by the demands on a God capable of creating an expanding universe containing millions of galaxies and billions of trillions of stars, as contemplated in the 21st century. The demands on arguable credibility, in these different ages, are similar in their relativity.

Given the large range of potential understandings of the term “God”, I would argue that an individual could well be justified in answering “yes and no”, when asked the question “do you believe in God?” It is often said that God is “love” and that “God created everything”. People, who find evolutionary ideas persuasive, might well believe in commonly held interpretations of “love” but find these characteristics wholly absent from the brutal natural selection, which apparently was essential to the evolution of humankind.

Finally, in view of the large range of belief systems found throughout the world, it seems difficult to reach an understanding of “God” independently of historic and cultural influences and subjective justifications. Just regarding our own (British) national history, one cannot escape the complex intertwining of varying degrees of religious bias, human power struggles and ownership of wealth and property. The argument that someone is king / queen by virtue of divine decree, can quickly be turned into political advantage and justification for unjust wealth acquisition and equally unjust treatment of others (beheading (or worse) on some occasions). It seems then that “God” is a very human phenomenon.

The instructions for praying, given by Jesus to his disciples, and the prayer said by thousands of Christians every week (if not every day), suggest a loving father should be the focus of our petitions. Human beings apparently have the propensity to find such a focus within them, without having to worry about the latest understandings of how the universe and humankind came into being, and whether or not the processes that define us are “natural” or otherwise. I suggest our innermost being is the perception (whether or not generated by “natural means”) that ultimately defines how we relate to our own life-experiences and the life-experiences of those around us. If “God” is intended to be synonymous with a “Loving Parent sensed within us”, then that is all well and good. If, on the other hand, “God” is intended somehow to embrace the large number of other potential meanings human beings seem to have attached to the label, one might question the justification of asserting “there is only one God”. For example, is a God of love the same as a God of brutal natural selection? Is a God of love the same as a God who requires the blood of an innocent to satisfy his wrath?

As we gaze into the murky pool of progressive understanding, perhaps we should not be too surprised to discover our own faces staring back.

Has God got a plan?

“God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year” we used to sing. We are not so sure nowadays that “The time is drawing near ... when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea”. We sang it in the 1950s when things were getting better year by year after WWII. We thought everything was going according to God’s plan for a better world. But now? – perhaps William Cowper is nearer the mark with “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform”.

God’s Plan in the Bible? The Bible is about God who is active in the world: God with an agenda. In the OT, God takes the chosen people to a Promised Land and then tries to make them righteous. In the NT, Jesus talks about the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Revelation culminates in a vision of the New Jerusalem, the City of God that will be set up at the end of time. In both testaments people of faith are given hope and encouragement to believe that even when things are bad God will ensure that they get better. In spite of appearances God is in control and, eventually, good will triumph over evil. Things will all be all right in the end.

The Bible story is not one of steady progress. The Exodus is followed by Exile from the Promised Land and then return; Israel and Judah randomly have good and bad kings; the Law is given then lost, then found again. In the NT the Messiah is born only to be crucified. The vision of Revelation is of chaos before God brings order, beauty and peace into the world. God, it appears, does not work in a direct manner. God does not move consistently towards a goal: sometimes the way is straight and the path smooth, but more often it is crooked. It was a zigzag route to the Promised Land: Jesus leads us to eternal life by way of the Cross.

God’s Plan in Creation. God who does not direct every detail of events is consistent with a scientific understanding. God created in such a way that on the small scale it works by means of random events among atoms and molecules, and on the large scale it progresses chaotically. It enables us to see the activity of God as the production of beauty and order by means of, not in spite of, the randomness. A butterfly’s wing, born out of the random chaos of evolution, is an example of God’s work in creation.

We can make scientific sense of creation in Genesis by recognising that God made evolution happen. God set in motion a great random process with the intention that it could, after eons of chaotic interactions, by a process of self-organisation, generate living conscious organisms capable of communicating with each other and with God. God did not know, didn’t need to know, the details, the outcome of each molecular interaction for example, but God intended and foresaw this result.

God’s Plan for the Kingdom. God seems to be using the same method of chaos and uncertainty to build the Kingdom, but there is a new difficulty because we humans can intervene in the way the world develops. From God’s point of view our interventions probably still look almost random as they are either constructive or destructive, but as some of us respond to God’s guidance our actions help the development in the way God intends it to go. When we cooperate with God by acting in accordance with God’s wishes, as far as we understand them, God is exerting influence. Although our actions are random, they are not quite so and have a bias in the direction of good.

Not a Plan but an Objective. It is not helpful to think of God as having a plan. It is more consistent with a scientific way of looking at things to think of it as an objective. God has not given the world a Satnav with a clear red line showing the precise path to be taken. What God has provided is a map showing a network of many roads allowing any number of possible routes to the desired journey’s end. We are free to choose which path to take, and many times we take the wrong turning, but if we are attentive to God’s guidance we can take – and sometimes do take – the right turning that moves things on towards the end God wants us to reach.

God exerts some control over the way the world develops by influencing people, but the control is far from precise because people do not always understand correctly. One person may say “God is telling me to love my enemies” while another (such as St Bernard when whipping up enthusiasm for the First Crusade) may say “God is telling me to slay the infidels”. In the 21stC there is the question as to whether God’s kingdom is to be attained by setting up a kind-hearted socialist world government or by allowing a free market in goods and services? Which is right? How are we to choose?

The easy answer for those who believe that God is love, whose objective is the building of a Kingdom of grace and love, is that the right thing to do is to act with love. That is certain, but it is often uncertain what the action in a given circumstance should be. When the beggar asks for money, we are uncertain how to respond. Some give cash, a sandwich, advice, or nothing. The individual responses are random, but the overall effect is to make things better for most beggars most of the time.

The atmosphere is a chaotic system as we all know. Cowper had the right idea with his image of God at work in the turbulence of a gale. Perhaps we should amend his hymn a little: “God moves in an uncertain way / His wonders to perform / He plants his footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm”.

Tony Judd

Origin of God?

It's been a good year. My fields are thriving, promising a good harvest. It's been hard work for all my family. Daybreak to sundown, every day we've been toiling away, making the most of the good weather. Sometime soon we'll have to start cutting our crops – more back-breaking work.

It wasn't always like this. A couple of years ago it rained every day for weeks on end, and our fields were waterlogged. Almost nothing grew. The storms came from over the hills a mile or so away, drowning the fields and even some of the wild animals in the woods. Despite our best efforts we had to abandon the fields and somehow, we survived the winter without going hungry. That was tough, I can tell you. And all my neighbours were in the same boat, almost literally at times.

It made us all wonder why things are like this – good and bad years. Is it because of something we've done or not done? Have we done something good when we get a good crop? And was it our fault, our mistakes, that would give us a bad one?

All this makes me wonder if there is something beyond our understanding that somehow controls our fortune. I've been living here for many years in this small valley, and my parents and grandparents before me. They had the same problems, I've been told, but I've learned nothing from them about why there are good years and bad years.

So, I'm wondering about some sort of Power that's responsible for all this – some sort of guardian spirit that watches over us and either rewards us or penalises us as the mood takes it. Should we try to find out what this Power is, or should we just carry on as we are, doing our best to help each other and trying to get the best crop from our fields?

Perhaps we should make some sort of gift to the Power – but what could we give? And how would we give it? Should offer this Power the best of our crop perhaps, to show that we would be grateful for a good harvest. Perhaps if we all went across the fields to the hills, we could make it some sort of occasion that the Power might notice.

And what would we call this Power? What name? After all, it's beyond anything we could imagine. It just is. It's as if this Power says to us "I AM WHAT I AM" which more or less stops us wondering any further. We'll never understand it – the best we can do is give it the honour we think it deserves.

Maybe in time to come people will work out what sort of Power this is – maybe they'll find a better name, get a better understanding. It would be wonderful if someone would explain to us how we should respond to this Power. In the meantime, we'll keep doing what we do as well as we can.

Robin Blount

Children of God

We are all children of God. Born in untainted innocence as the sons and daughters of God the Father, Creator of all that is and ever has been. The apostles, and other followers of The Way, went out after Pentecost to spread The Word following Jesus' instruction to "Feed my Sheep." They baptised converts and, as they created the early Church, they spoke of Jesus as the Messiah – the prophet spoken of in the OT - sent by God.

As always, in discussions of religion and spirituality, there is a great temptation to dive down any one of a dozen rabbit holes, to explore the myriad themes that spring up around the topic under discussion. I am treading carefully in the hope that I can avoid twisting my ankle by falling into one of these treacherous holes. I don't think they enrich the discussion. I am happy to work from the premise that every man can be a son of God, and every woman, a daughter of God. I think this is clearly stated in the John 1: 12-13: (NRSV)

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

So let's forget "the only Son of the Father," and all such phrases, and focus on our status rather than that of Jesus. I think that we mostly ignore the idea that we are children of God. We find it too complicated, and not something we can handle.

Let's ask the simple question: If we are Children of God, should we behave differently? Let's reject the idea that we are "not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table" and let's see ourselves alongside Jesus, the apostles, and the whole company of saints, with all of us having a God-given mission to help humanity get back on track and live in a permanent state of Love?

Time and again over the centuries, humans were aligning themselves into two groups. They were either selfish and violent, or they were living in fear and lacking self-confidence. Many prophets of many faiths have been sent with the same mission: to address this same problem. Down the centuries governments controlled through fear, and so it was with the early Church, with its threats of Hell and Damnation for all who failed to comply with the Church's random and often perverse strictures.

Martin Luther saw through this, but the spirit of the Reformation was not enough to break the established Church structure. Religious institutions continue to come and go, avoiding the idea that we are divine, and that God lives in every one of us. The truth is simple: God is in Heaven, and Heaven is in your soul. You need look no further.

Bob Harvey

Homophobia is misogyny in disguise

The divisive and acrimonious debate within the Church about the moral standing of homosexuality centres, it is often claimed, on competing understandings of the nature of scripture and its interpretation; a fraught but earnest exegetical and theological endeavour.

Only I don't believe it, for at its heart, all theology is psychology.

As Graham Stanton¹ argued, underlying widely differing approaches to biblical interpretation are the presuppositions and prejudices, often unacknowledged, of competing scholars. Even the most rigorous and methodical among us are prone to confirmation bias² where we embrace information that serves our pre-conceptions, which may be only minimally informed by the academic discipline we claim to employ.

When Copernicus discovered that the sun was at the centre of the solar system, scripture was used to condemn him; the early slavery abolitionists had to combat appropriations of scripture that appeared to condone slavery. The Christian world has been able to reinterpret these controversies, ignore a hard dominical saying on divorce and the 'Holiness Code' prohibitions on food and apparel, yet prohibitions on sexuality are still promulgated as first order issues, the 'final assault on morality'³ despite many of the surrounding sentences in Leviticus having largely been discounted.

The continuing controversy about homosexuality, with the underlying selective interpretation of scripture, and the vehemence of conservative protagonists, I would argue, is actually not about sexuality, but is partially, perhaps largely, a proxy war about gender.

Harriet Bradley⁴ argues that gender definitions are universal, pervasive, mediated by institutions and largely constructed, notwithstanding the more obvious impacts of physicality.

Simone de Beauvoir⁵ stated that throughout history men have constructed an absolute normative human type – the male. Richard Rorty⁶ comments that in such a social 'economy' being non-male is one way of being 'not fully human' and Colleen Conway speaks of the slippery 'gender gradient'⁷, a potential descent that men daily fear, from masculinity to effeminacy, to femininity, the ultimate degradation. Rorty⁸ further notes that there are considered several ways of becoming non-male; one is to be born without a penis, another is to have been penetrated by a penis.

In societies where male and female roles are more fluid, Jeffrey Stout⁹ observes, homosexuals will not seem so anomalous, but where gender roles are more clearly delineated, they become too



Kevin O'Brien is Rector of St Columba's Church, Ennis with Kilnasoolagh and Christ Church, Spanish Point.

ambiguous to tolerate – the 'social equivalent of a monster'. These assumptions are so often deeply embedded within ourselves and the groups to which we belong that we never question them.¹⁰

The conservative theologian Stanley Hauerwas¹¹ asserts that any authentic Christian ethic must necessarily deny that sex is a 'private' matter and that the narrative of the Christian community must predominate, the wellbeing of the individual subjugated to the group, the church, irrespective of one's particular sexuality.

However, the tradition of the Christian group has never been as benevolent as he might like to believe. It has fostered fear of sexuality, legitimated male dominance over women and excoriated those who do not conform.¹² Hauerwas is sometimes tempted to obfuscate by stating that the Christian community is not yet ready to pronounce on an issue; in this instance I agree. Until the Christian community addresses its misogyny, I fear it will never eradicate its homophobia.

¹ Stanton, G. (1977) *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principals and Methods*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p.60

² Heshmat, S. What is Confirmation Bias? *Psychology Today*, 23 Apr 2015 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias>

³ Christian Opposition to Homosexuality, <https://www.usask.ca/education/documents/profiles/cochrane/opposition.pdf> p.2

⁴ Bradley, H. (2007) *Gender*, Polity Press, p.1-6

⁵ de Beauvoir, S. (1961) *The Second Sex*, Bantam Books, p. xv-xvii

⁶ Rorty, R. (1999) *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, p. 244

⁷ Conway, C.M. (2008) *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*, Oxford University Press, p. 50

⁸ Rorty, R. (1999) p. 243

⁹ Stout, J. (1990) *Ethics after Babel*, James Clarke & Co, Cambridge, p.153

¹⁰ Bradley, H. (2007) p. 1-6

¹¹ eds Berkman, J. Cartwright, M. (2001) *The Hauerwas Reader*, Duke University Press, p. 484

¹² eds Ellison, M.H. Brown Douglas, K. (2010) *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* 2nd Ed, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 409

Cerebrations

To save you looking in a dictionary it means: reflection, speculation or thought. If you come across a quote or a brief thought worth sharing, please send it in: dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character; if there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home; if there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation; when there is order in each nation, there will be peace in the world.

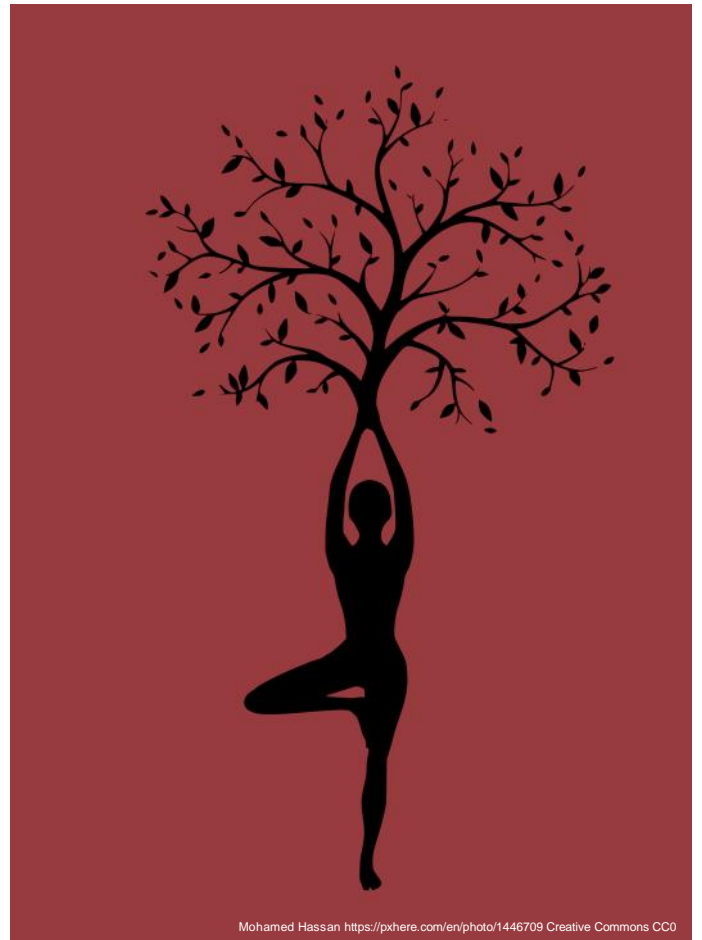
A sage of ancient China

Esteemed friends, citizens of Athens, the greatest city in the world, so outstanding in both intelligence and power, aren't you ashamed to care so much to make all the money you can, and to advance in reputation and prestige – while for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your soul you have no care or worry?

Socrates

People are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetite.

Edmund Burke



By doubting, we come to inquire and by inquiry we arrive at truth.

Peter Abelard

It was because of these newfound understandings – that religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved – that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day and be baptized.

Barack Obama

Where people are praying for peace the cause of peace is being strengthened by their very act of prayer, for they are themselves becoming immersed in the spirit of peace.

John Macquarrie

In our own Image

All my life, I have been taught by the Church that I have been created 'in the image of God'. This is one of the fundamental Church teachings about human beings. This teaching is first mentioned in the Bible in Gen 1:26-27 and later, apparently justifying capital punishment for murder, in Gen 9:6.

Even though this 'likeness' of humans to God is couched in speaking of a hierarchy of authority/dominion in Gen 1, most talk I have experienced in church about humans being made in God's image, goes way beyond talk of authority/dominion and concentrates far more on the 'nature' and 'character' of God and following that, what image we have in us; what we humans are 'likened' to.

Building on the Church and Biblical teachings, the image of God for many can mean that humans are endowed with similar qualities of mental, social and moral discernment that are first considered to be the nature of God. I don't believe many think that humans look like God physically, (and vice-versa) however many do think of God as knowing everything, having the power to do anything, and is perfectly good. Although many would not actually say it, it could be said that God is envisaged as a perfectly good, exceedingly superhuman being.

Marcus Borg (The Heart of Christianity p. 65) states: Supernatural theism images God as a person-like being. To be sure, God is an exceedingly superlative personlike being, is indeed the Supreme Being. Which I think is the dominant basis on which the whole biblical story is built.

I have been taught that: God in God's self is a relational being. God exists as Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God created humanity in God's image, therefore creating humanity as relational beings as God is relational. Humanity was created first to relate to God and secondly to one another.

The more we speak of the nature of God and of God's attributes and activities, the more we can say about our God 'likeness'.

From the Bible, another major characteristic of God is that '*God is love*' 1 John 4:8. God is also



George Stuart is a hymn writer, minister, and analytical chemist, with degrees in Applied Chemistry, Arts and Theology. He lives in Newcastle, Australia.

'gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness' Exodus 34:6. So another 'likeness' can be contemplated. Humans are capable of love, having been made in the 'likeness' of God, who is love.

Another attribute of God comes from the Wisdom of Solomon, an early Christian document but not included in the Canon of Scripture: For God created man to be immortal and made him to be an image of his own eternity. The righteous, because they are made in the image of God, can rest in the full hope of eternal life. Wisdom of Solomon 2:23

One could go on, postulating attributes of God and enlarging the canvas on which to view our human 'likenesses' to God. However, looking at this from the opposite perspective, leads me to ask:

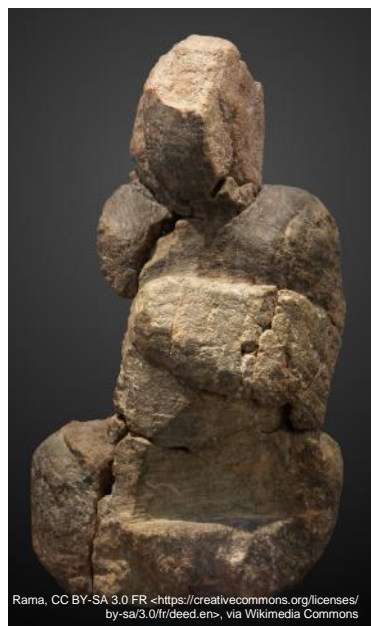
Have humans made God in our image/likeness? It has been said that the whole Bible is a story about God. It tells us who God is; what is God's nature; where God can be found and where God lives; what God has done and how; why God has done what God has done. In God's relationship with human beings, the Bible is regarded by many as our guidebook for this, particularly from the 'God side'. However, just about every time the Bible speaks about God anthropomorphisms are used. All the Bible is saturated with them.

'Anthropos' is the Greek word for 'man' or 'human'. An anthropomorphism, when speaking of God, is a statement that uses words and concepts, emotions and behaviours which are appropriately used when speaking about human-beings and their activities. If, when speaking about God, use is made of anthropomorphisms, it seems to me this is the beginning of creating God in our human image. We talk about humans and then use the same language and comment to speak about God.

In the Bible, anthropomorphisms are used to describe God, the essence, character and nature of God, the activity of God and what prompted God to do what God did. The authors of biblical material have used these anthropomorphic statements to create an image of God that is very human. When we then say that humans are made in this image in the image of God, and in the next breath say very human things to define our concept of God, this is a tightly closed circular argument. I find it unconvincing and unhelpful.



Using the pronoun 'He', when referring to God, is obviously an anthropomorphism. I believe such gender specific words should never be used when referring to God. Bruegemann (The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1 p. 803) is absolutely correct when he states: *Such 'anthropomorphic' portrayals as we have in the text belong to the core of biblical faith and are not incidental footnotes.*



There seems to be a continuous story telling about God doing human things and indeed acting just like a human being. Does this mean that the Bible writers are creating God in the human image? One might ask, "Well how else can talk about God?" Good question, and difficult to answer, if there is one. I think there is but at this stage I am just stating facts about the content of the Bible.

The whole content of the Bible points me in the direction of humans desperately trying to speak of God in terms that other humans can understand and relate to. I quote Bruegemann (ibid) again: No other mode of theological speech so well touches the human concreteness of faith.

He is speaking about 'anthropomorphic' talk. I agree. But this may be because it is the only *'mode of theological speech'* that is continuously used in the Bible, by church teachers and leaders and also universally used in the weekly church services. We ask God to 'listen to' and 'hear' our prayers and 'answer' us; etc., etc. Other *'modes of theological speech'* have not been given a chance to find traction and even blossom. I think this is because the anthropomorphic *'mode'* is returned to when things get a bit complex or obscure. This could be because other *'modes of theological speech'* are more abstract and difficult to understand.

This digestible anthropomorphic image of God, just because it is so human, is most acceptable because it gives an answer to many serious questions. What is the origin of the universe? God created it all. Where did we come from? God made us in 'his' own image. Who is in control of everything? God. What is the purpose of humanity? To worship God and to live with our neighbours as God has commanded.

When analysing this talk, I think it is all anthropomorphic, but I think many, if not most ordinary churchgoers accept these answers. But for me, this ignores 'the mystery' that underlies absolutely everything.

I think this is gradually changing and I can't wait for that to accelerate. As Marcus Borg states in his book "The God We Never Knew": As the twentieth century and the second Christian millennium draw to a close, an older way of understanding Christianity that nourished (and sometimes haunted) the lives of millions of people for over a thousand years has ceased to be persuasive to many in our time. More specifically, over the last thirty to forty years, an older way of thinking about God (and the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity itself) has ceased to be compelling to many.

It is important to realise that when stating that humans are 'made in the image or likeness of God', our starting point is to accept that God and humans are separate and distinct. 'Likeness' can only be a quality when the two different 'things' are being compared. They need to be separate and distinct. This leads to my second question:

As a follower of Jesus, do I have to believe that God and humans are distinct and separate?

If the answer is 'Yes' then this creates a theological 'dualism' of God/Humanity and leads to the idea of God being 'outside' or 'away' and God and humans not being united. This also leads to the creation of space for the 'supernatural' to operate, to have influence and even control. Matthew Fox (Original Blessing p.89) comments on this question: G.Jung has written that there are two ways to lose your soul. One of these is to worship a god outside you. If he is correct, then a lot of churchgoers in the West have been losing their souls for generations to the extent that they have attended religious events where prayer is addressed to a god outside. The *idea that God is 'out there' is probably the ultimate dualism*, divorcing as it does God and humanity and reducing religion to a childish state of *pleasing or pleading with a God 'out there'*. All theism sets up a model paradigm of people here and God out there. All theisms are about subject/object relationships to God.

Fox refers to the God/human dualism and goes on to state that this leads to the idea that God is *'outside'*; that *'people are here and God out there'*. He then presents an alternative (ibid p.90): What is the solution to the killing of God and the losing of human soul? It is our moving from theism to pantheism. Now pantheism is not



pantheism. Pantheism, which is a declared heresy because it robs God of transcendence, states that *everything is God and God is everything*. ...

Panentheism, on the other hand, is altogether orthodox and very fit for orthopraxis as well, for it *slips in the little Greek word 'en' and thus means, 'God is in everything and everything is in God.'* This experience of the presence of God in our depth ... in all the blessings and suffering of life is a mystical understanding of God.

Being a '*mystical understanding of God*', it is not the easiest to understand or explain. Maybe we can't. In my understanding of panentheism there is no separation or distinctiveness between God and humanity. Humanity and everything else is in God and God is in everything. God could be thought of as the inherent spiritual, the Divine dimension of humanity and everything. This is totally inclusive. God cannot be separated from anything.

We must leave behind the ideas given to us as children, and take seriously new information and concepts we have about reality, the universe, humanity and God.

I believe I have been taught things by the Church that are hopelessly out of date and should be discarded:

1. I have been taught about a god that created humans in god's image.

2. I have been taught that God and the universe, including me, are distinct from separate.

3. I have been taught the Genesis story of the origins of the earth and nature, built on Hebrew, pre-scientific understandings.

I need to embrace different ideas and concepts. So, I have changed:

1. We have created God in our human image by all our anthropomorphic talk, supposedly solving much of the Mystery that underlies everything. We need to use other categories with which to approach the Mystery. Maybe we should stop using the word 'God' altogether, as Michael Morwood suggests, and use other words and phrases like 'Ground of Being' or 'Presentness' or 'the Present, pervading, embracing, penetrating, inherent Mystery' or maybe 'The Divine Mystery'.

2. We need a theology which unites God and Humanity. Panentheism does this for me.

3. We need a new and different story of our origins. There are a few that are already present. One such story includes estimates and 21st Century concepts:

- The Big Bang occurred about 13.7 billion years ago. In a trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second our universe underwent a gigantic growth spurt, the Big Bang, which shaped its structure as we see it today.

- The Earth is about 4.5 billion years old and our Sun about 4,6 billion.
- Humans, as we look like and act today, have lived on the Earth for 2 - 300,000 years.
- Evolution, a process active in our universe, is a never-ending process which always moves towards that which is more complex. What is in the past has helped forge what exists now and what exists now will have a significant influence on what evolves in the future.
- Everything is connected. The carbon atoms that are part of my makeup, within me, are billions of years old and came in being at the explosion of stars. I am made of stardust. I have evolved from previous forms of life.
- When I die, these atoms, as well as all the other atoms and molecules that form me, will continue to be part of the universe and contribute to it in a different way.

Of course, a lot more could be added to this particular story. Let the church adopt this new story and treat the Genesis stories as giving some wisdom, but coming from 3000 years ago, long before having the knowledge we have now. We have created God in our own image and this god is 'out there'. What a tragedy. We can and must do better!

God Beyond, Within, Between

God is beyond, within, between;
The now and what has been;
God in the future and before;
The ever wondrous 'More'.

God is beyond gods we create,
Ev'n those we venerate.
God is beyond what is beyond,
But still our hearts respond.

God is within, the force we know
In all life's ebb and flow,
In God we live and move and be,
And touch and taste and see.

And God we know is in between,
Involved but still unseen,
When fostering in you and me
A rich community.

God is within to sanctify;
Beyond to glorify;
God is between to unify;
Of this we testify.

George Stuart

Tune: St Magnus, CM

Copyright free hymns for each week of the Revised
Common Lectionary.

<https://sites.google.com/view/george-stuart/home>

Matthew 5: 1-12

When God feels furthest away, is when intimacy with God can come instantly.

When your heart is broken into a million pieces, is when others are most likely to embrace us and we are the least likely to refuse.

When we are most aware of who we truly are, is when we are fully aware of the beauty and wonder of the world around us.

When we give all that we are to do the right thing, is when our achievements give the greatest affirmation.

When we see the pain in the eyes of a person who has wronged us, is when we feel fully human.

When we have received forgiveness, escaped distraction, know ourselves and place ourselves before the ground of our being, is when we are closest to God.

When we seek to calm troubled waters, help others to communicate, refuse to respond in kind, is when we are acting most like God's children.

When we are living God's kingdom and the world seeks to compromise, confront, or confound us, is when we are being the most Christ-like.

In all things, rejoice and be glad, for God is within, around, and beyond all that is.

Mentored

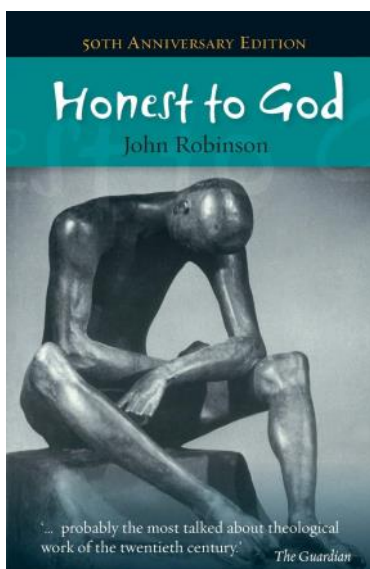
I was brought up as a Christian through the Methodist Church via Sunday School, Youth Fellowship, Sunday School Teacher. I went through that rebellious period where we doubt, struggle, challenge what we've been taught. In secondary school I read 'Honest to God' by John Robinson and then, the book which had the most profound effect on me, 'The Christian Agnostic' by Leslie Weatherhead. Even though the latter was first published in 1965 it seems to me that the Christian Church has learnt very little!

Fast forwarding to ten years ago when I answered the call to be considered for training to be a Methodist Local Preacher. I knew my tutors / mentors very well. I respected and valued their calling and quickly discovered their commitment as Progressive Christians. They introduced me to the thoughts and writings of Jack Spong, Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan and many others. I will be forever grateful for my their guidance, support and friendship. The way they were able to assure me that I wasn't alone in my doubts and struggles. Sometimes I still wonder what I'm doing when I attend church services where conservative orthodoxy is preached as though it were fact, beyond questioning. It is as though when we enter the church portal we're expected to leave our brains on the doormat.

Although I am unable to attend local PCN meetings, I look forward to receiving PV and learning from others. I especially enjoy personal reflections and the book reviews. The problem is I'm quickly running out of room to store the many wonderful books suggested/recommended!

I am sure many members of the PCN, like me, have come to rely on PCN's encouragement and challenge to keep us hanging on to the Church by our fingernails! Keep up the good work.

Paul Wilks



REACH Ely 2025



As part of its ten year strategy for growth, the Diocese of Ely entered into a research project, REACH Ely (Reimagining Churches as Community Assets for the Common Good) with the Cambridge Judge Business School and the generous support of Benefact Trust and Historic England.

The purpose of project was to investigate how churches engage with their communities, how communities value church buildings, and the contribution that churches and their buildings make to the common good. It is hoped that the project will help parishes make fuller use of their buildings which, in turn, may help with their maintenance.

Following a literature review, the research team undertook detailed scoping case studies of 40 churches across the diocese selected at random which are now published. This was followed by an audit of church buildings done by means of a detailed questionnaire. The report of the audit was published in Nov 2022 and makes interesting reading. Thus, not surprisingly, more than 75% of the returns noted that closure of their church would have a devastating impact on their community while one rather unexpected insight from the Audit is that the absence of facilities, e.g., kitchen, washroom, and heating, is not an impediment to the organisation of community activities. Notably, 35.6% of church buildings without facilities are used for such activities.

Building on information obtained by the case studies and the audit, a number of Guidance papers have been published. These papers which are supported by videos on You Tube, deal with such matters as "Being an Open Church Safely, Setting Up a Friends Group and "Becoming a Festival Church".

This project, all of the outcomes of which are available on the Ely Diocese website, will prove invaluable to rural parishes, not just in Ely but across the country, as they struggle to maintain and preserve the historical buildings which are such an important part of our national heritage.

Nigel Bastin

Local groups

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

Newcomers are always welcome.

Bolton Jim Hollyman
01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

At our Nov meeting we started to look at Don MacGregor's book "Christianity Expanding – into Universal Spirituality". It's the first in a series which Don is writing "which seek to expand the theological framework of Christianity.... into a more universal spirituality."

Dr Rupert Sheldrake writes "this book is a lucid and thoughtful guide to this process, and shows how the essential core teachings of Christianity can be disentangled from unhelpful interpretations that stand in the way of a living Christian faith in the 21st century".

In Jan we looked at chapter 3 "The Evolving Scientific Worldview" which caused animated discussion, not a little confusion, and much questioning. It's an interesting book! Normally our meetings continue to be on the first Wed each month at 1.30 - 3 pm always ending with some moments of silent prayer.

We meet face to face at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton.

In addition, for those who find Zoom helpful, especially those living at a distance from Bolton, we send out a link each month to those who have indicated they wish to join us.

Cornwall Gwen Wills
gwen.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

At last we are off the ground – and what better way to kick off the new year than for us to have our first meeting on 10 Jan. Unfortunately illness and other hiccups prevented several people from attending, but eight of us gathered in the Green Room at Fraddon Village Hall.

We are an informal friendly group and used our first meeting to get to know each other and share experiences. We will continue meeting on the second Tue each month, and we look forward to welcoming others to join us as we plan a varied programme.



Manchester John Ramsbottom
0161 456 5119 john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk

We continue to hold meetings on a monthly basis, and these resumed in Sept after the summer break.

The topics we considered were "Demon possession" and "Gender identity", both these sessions being lead by a member who expressed an interest in this subject. We also shared in one of the PCN Zoom lectures in the Science and Faith series as this coincided with the normal meeting date.

We try to cover a broad spectrum of subjects of interest to the group and are always looking for new ideas which might be worth pursuing.

Meetings are planned to resume in the new year, the first of which will be a consideration of the ideas of Bishop Spong, as this cropped up during one of the evenings, and we have not thought about this for quite a while. Spong of course died a few years ago, but left several controversial books which have inspired many along the progressive path. We intend to base this meeting around a DVD of one of his lectures "Jesus for the non-religious"

Thereafter, the following months as yet have no definite programme planned, but these will be announced via email and also posted on the PCN calendar.

Our meetings are generally on the 4th Wed of the month at Heaton Moor United church in Stockport.

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

For the first time as far as I am aware, we watched a sermon via YouTube in our Nov meeting. The title was 'The Theology of Abortion', delivered by Rev'd Rich Lang at Washington United Methodist Church. Lang approached the issue with great sensitivity, starting from a historical and theological overview. We contributed our own thoughts in the quiet discussion which followed. By Dec the first snow was on the ground around Newcastle, leading to a reduced turnout. However, the theme of 'Journeys' was particularly appropriate and the group's contributions included hair-raising memories of experiencing a hurricane off the Cape of Good Hope, as well as an interesting

discussion of TS Eliot's 'The Journey of the Magi'. At our meetings we enjoy sharing a little food, and particularly so at Christmas time.

Northallerton Peter Brophy
01609 761182 peter.brophy@pcnbritain.org.uk

A new group has just started in Northallerton, North Yorkshire, meeting on the first Tue of each month at Romanby Methodist Church (2.30 - 4pm, gather from 2pm). The intention is to function as a book group, looking at titles by authors like Brian McLaren, Marcus Borg, Richard Holloway, Steve Chalke and John Shelby Spong.

Oakham Peter Stribblehill
07918 916466 peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

In the autumn of 2022 we mainly used material from talks at Greenbelt as our source of inspiration, considering Richard Dawkins and a talk organised by the Faraday Institute. Since Christmas we have continued this theme but hope to have sessions on the origins and diversity of religions round the world and something to mark the 60th anniversary of Honest to God. Our sessions continue at Oakham Methodist Church and are typically attended by 16 – 20 people.

St Albans John Churcher
07738706739 churcher17@gmail.com

The monthly Zoom meetings that started at the beginning of the Covid lockdown continue to attract members from across the UK and speakers have also come from Australia, Canada, the USA, as well as our 'home grown'. The meetings continue on the 4th Thurs each month. In addition, we have restarted our face-to-face meetings on the 2nd Thurs each month. Details of speakers are on the website.

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth
radpilgrims@gmail.com

During the lockdown (do we remember that?) a regular on-line Zoom meeting/chat was established on Thursdays from 11am. With huge thanks to Ray and Jenny Beaumont, two of our members, we have continued this arrangement, which has also allowed the group to broaden beyond the local area, drawing in friends from further afield. Thursdays have become a wonderful general exploration of whatever is current, and many other random topics. They have followed no formal agenda or topic, and it has proven a

great support to many of us. We are attempting to regather again outside of the virtual world on at least one Sat a month. Venues and times and purpose are all under review. No formal agenda is planned, but closer to Valentines Day, we hope to share our understanding of Love.

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

We continue to enjoy the fellowship and stimulating discussion at our meetings every 2 months or so, although our numbers remain a little below pre-covid levels. Recently PCN webinars have provided plenty of scope for the exchange of views, including "An evening with John Dominic Crossan". When asked whether he thought the work of the Jesus Seminar had been ultimately worthwhile Crossan acknowledged that the ongoing struggle for truth to prevail is the prime concern. He saw it as more important than trying to change the Church – perhaps the best we can hope for? Asked to comment on the difference between the post-resurrection Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he suggested there was only one Jesus – which is an interesting way of putting it. We also discussed Julian Baggini's "The Godless Gospel". Whatever his problems with theology and belief, Baggini clearly places great value on the community of the church, in terms of the mutual support and the outreach. Asked what he would do if he were to be put in charge of the Church, he replied that he would aim for no-one to be in charge! Another interesting idea. Next time we look forward to talking about "Is Britain still a Christian country?" (Linda Woodhead, 9 Feb). One suspects Crossan's point about the greater importance of living out the truth will be in there somewhere.



Now the green blades

Now the green blades rise up, from the buried grain,
Little seeds in darkness many days have lain;
Life thrives again, as nature's beauty's seen:
Nature's power shows as grasses spring up green.

Mother nature's bounty gives us what we need,
The web of life ensures that all of us can feed,
From the smallest creature to the greatest beast,
There's enough to satisfy in nature's bounteous feast.

But now we must be careful, things are looking bad ,
We've been far too greedy, wasting all we had,
Earth's buried treasures, oil, gas and coal,
All releasing carbon which takes its deadly toll.

If we don't take action, the ecosphere is doomed,
We cannot keep on taking, as we once assumed,
Time to rethink, to change our wasteful ways,
Before we reach the final, fatal, end of days.

We've taken it for granted, enjoying all we could,
Fossil-fuelled energy, little understood,
What a great price our greedy habits cost,
We're now in serious danger our lives could soon be lost.

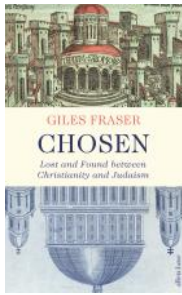
Our children's children's future is now in serious doubt,
Climate change could soon cause massive, widespread drought,
Lands that we thought would grow abundant grain,
Could very soon become a dust-bowl once again.

Now it's time to rise up, demand that things must change,
There isn't time to doubt, to say it's all too strange,
We all must take action, reduce the carbon waste,
And do all we can to remove the threat we face.

Iain Melville

Reviews

Chosen by Giles Fraser,
Allen Lane



The book starts with the story of how the expulsion of the Occupy movement from St Paul's led the author to resign as a Canon of the cathedral. He then experienced a degree of ostracism

at the hands of former colleagues, the break up of his marriage, and combined with feeling disorientated, led to him contemplate suicide. He chose writing as a sort of therapy and what emerges is an involved exploration of three themes.

The first is the ways in which several of his Jewish ancestors sought to assimilate, either keeping some sort of distinctive Jewish identity or not bothering to do so at all.

The second is the way in which Christianity, and the various forms of Judaism, developed their distinctive identities, which can overlap, but which now seem to be going their own ways, and the fall out from that on people down the ages.

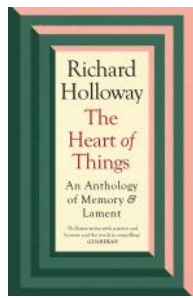
The third is a reflection on the idea of what connects us to God. He draws parallels between ideas of purity attached to the Temple in Judaism and what seems to have finally caused the clergy at St Paul's to decide to apply for a court order expelling the Occupy protesters, namely a woman, apparently with mental difficulties, defecating on the floor of the cathedral. Was this an example of putting the beauty of buildings above the deeper things of God such as justice etc, or a legitimate removal of protesters who were beginning to interrupt the proper running of the cathedral and achieving nothing by doing so?

The book ends with a description of a baptism service he conducted at the River Jordan. Although there are some sharp words regarding the fate of Palestinian Christians, the passage works because he doesn't set himself up as the arbiter of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict; he simply describes what he sees and why he conducted the service.

I was engrossed reading it and have no difficulty recommending it to others.

Guy Whitehouse

The Heart of Things by Richard Holloway, Canongate



This short book is packed with poems and prose from Virgil and Homer to Betjeman with a penchant for Larkin, Nietzsche and Orwell, a chapter given over to war poetry, a tranche of 20th Century

American writers, Scottish and Irish writers too, plus of course the Bible. Each chapter concludes with previously unpublished poetry from Holloway with an absolute corker to finish returning to the theme of 'the heart of things' introduced with a quote from Virgil near the start. Surprisingly, given his definition of anthology as "a gathering of flowers plucked from other people's gardens", there is much of him here, in addition to his poetry. There is commentary on the core themes of Passing, Mourning, Warring, Ruining and Forgiveness and musing on the collection itself, often illustrated through memoir. This is a collection of flowers that has enlarged the life of the writer and, in my case at least, the reader too.

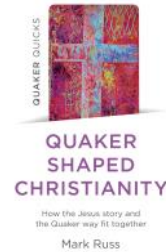
It's a melancholic work – for Holloway most of life has passed as have the tenets of the faith that largely shaped it – yet this remains a hopeful book. "Genuine hope is tentative", he reflects, whilst considering some of Betjeman's later work set against a photograph (one of many) of the rugged Cornish coast. Holloway convincingly salvages the term 'passing' as a euphemism for death and the notion of 'regret' (observing that only psychopaths live without it). There is a familiar critique of religion, in the final chapter "Forgiving" where Holloway once more exposes the literalisation of Myth and its harmful effects, in particular the story of Adam and Eve. Holloway continues to be drawn to the person of Jesus, but as one who taught that the forgiven/forgiving life is the one worth living, rather than as a salvific Being. Thus, in his own closing poem, he returns to the image of the picture- houses he frequented as a boy unsure if there is a Someone "like the projectionist" behind his life and wondering whether at The End he'll know.

To use his own words, Holloway shows himself here once more a

great "journalist of the soul", along with the other writers in the anthology. This isn't just a page turner; it's one where you reach the end and say, 'I'll be back!'

Nick Jones

Quaker Shaped Christianity by Mark Russ, Christian Alternative Russ, Quaker theology tutor at Woodbrooke, gives attention here to doctrines which progressives



question: the cross, atonement, and eschatology. The findings of the enlightenment and 'the Quest' are considered but he suggests 'reading the Bible, not uncritically or

literally, but treating it as a conversation partner.'

Eschatology, 'has a history of being told badly'. For him the 'second coming' is best understood not as a cataclysmic event in the future but as the process of God's 'arrival' into the world alongside Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God, giving a focus to work for a better world.

There is a moving description of his early journey from atheism, coming out as gay and finding a welcome at Quaker meetings. The ideas that 'Jesus died for me' and of 'original sin' are replaced by seeing the cross as God's response to sin, 'the reminder that the struggle for the Kingdom of God might cost us everything ... but we can never be separated from God.'

He critiques universalism, defining it as either that all will be saved, or 'that all religious paths lead to God, and are equally true'. But respect for other religions does not require equating them in the way he suggests. Many Quakers find other faiths do speak to them and, as we learn more about them, we find ideas to take into our own living. There is a further challenge to universalists when he asks 'is it possible to step back from our situation and see the whole picture? ... We can't step outside our bodies, our language and culture.' I disagree as an anthropologist whose tradition tries to think ourselves into the position of others, and so step outside our own culture and world view.

The book is helpful and accessible, and provides a refreshing way to explore Christian faith and life.

Peter Varney

belonging by Amanda Thompson,
Canongate

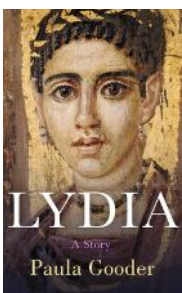


To read this book is to meander with the writer through her life's experiences, rooting from her Black Scottish upbringing, and to see through her multitude of lenses from artist to writer, to birdwatcher, to hillwalker and more. The path is crisscrossed with many intersections; she reflects on the impact of one track on the other. Dr Amanda Thompson is a visual artist, writer and lecturer at Glasgow School of Art. She lives and works in Glasgow and Strathspey. The Caledonian pinewoods feature as a constant source of inspiration. In this book she muses on questions such as, 'How do we make sense of the seemingly disparate parts of life, connecting past to present, or one year to the next?'

Throughout are: fascinating and well researched facts on natural history particularly focussed on the Scottish Highlands; an exploration of language and dialect; a foray into folklore; reflections on racism, feminism, the slave trade, colonialism and foreign travels. For me this book had a surprise at every turn, with of gems of wisdom, curious facts, and bursts of insight. I felt it was not a book with a destination but an invitation to enjoy the journey. It is not a text book on any of the subjects it covers: if you know what you are looking for then this book is probably not for you. Thompson states 'this never started out as a memoir, though perhaps it's become, in part, a memorial.' I agree, it is hard to define what this book is, but it gives insight on how observing, discerning and learning from surroundings and history, can develop one's sense of belonging.

Meryl White

Lydia by Paula Gooder,
Hodder & Stoughton

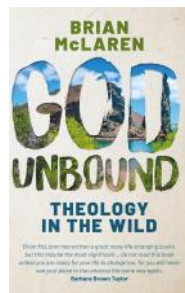


The central character in this story is Lydia who was a seller of purple whom we meet briefly in Acts 11 when Paul and Silas visit the Roman colony of Philippi. We are told she was

a "worshipper of God" and attended a place of prayer with other women on the riverside outside the gates. It was there that, on the Sabbath, Paul joined them. She was so taken with his words that she and her household were baptised. Paul and Silas subsequently stayed with her until they left following a short period in jail. The author takes this story and creates around it a more detailed, though fictitious, story drawing upon her own considerable biblical knowledge to bring these characters to life. We enter a world where followers of the Way meet in small groups often in houses and, where from time to time, conflicts can break out between them, especially with those who are followers of Jesus but still respect the Law. We experience the hostility of the local Roman citizens to all those who profess faith in Jesus. We also join them in Lydia's house when Paul's letter is read to them and, because of the author's considerable skill as a story teller, one feels part of that meeting because we have got to know many of those there. Although one might be familiar with much of the material upon which this book is based, the author provides a new and refreshing dimension to it. She brings it alive. This is a fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable read.

Nigel Bastin

God Unbound by Brian McLaren.
Canterbury Press



At the start I was slightly off put finding it just another travelogue - and the Galapagos too! The Galapagos is a place I've always thought tourists should stay away from - not

pollute them with our waste as many cruise ships reportedly do - rather leave it to the experts to discover more about the ecosystems of these remarkable islands. However, I warmed to Brian's small cruise ship and the islands' strict rules regarding waste disposal etc. I envied the opportunity to snorkel. I have done a little snorkeling off Zanzibar after running a training course in Dar es Salaam and also near Tanga, Tanzania when visiting healthcare programmes near there. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

Throughout the book Brian describes his religious journey from Bible-based evangelical Christian to liberal searcher - from evangelical pastor to liberal Christian writer. Brian states that computers don't make the world a better place - that I can agree with, but he thinks watching tortoises does make the world a better place and writing books does not. I take issue with that as his book has got me thinking, questioning, searching and if it does that for others that could make some of the world a better place too. Brian leads us to pondering the thought that God (interpret how you like) enjoyed the plants and animals of this world for millions of years before we humans came along. Maybe we're not the be all and end all of Creation but what matters now is how we stop wrecking this wonderful world.

I wrote this while on my own in Pembrokeshire for a few days experiencing God in the wild - what could be better? I heartily recommend this book.

Tina Everett

Old Man

By your side
There is peace,
A quiet place
Of beauty and realisation,
Where wisdom
Seeks reason and
understanding,
Where myth is laid to rest
By the reality of knowledge.

By your side
There is hope,
That arrogance and greed
Will not destroy,
That selfless love
Will prevail.

By your side
Life is sacred,
A future
For the children
To unfold.
By your side
In your presence
There is love.

Chris Roe

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

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

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

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

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



Love unwrapped

In the breeze a feather floats.
Is it falling or is it dancing?
Is it tossed by the wind or using the wind?
What do you see?
What do you believe?

In the early morning the disciples looked into the tomb.
The wrappings lay, one folded, one discarded.
What did they see?
What did they believe?

Death came, but love lives.

Perhaps a folded cloth speaks of time to prepare
and a discarded cloth of sudden death.
Why both?
A reminder perhaps
that however it comes death is not the end,
the spirit that once gave the body life
is free as a feather to dance in wind,
and the wrappings of this world no longer define it.

We talk of seeing but it is not a body we see.
It is the evidence of life beyond death,
it is the feather dancing in the breeze,
the kindness of a stranger,
the sight of love making a difference,
that first laugh after sorrow,
the lifting of a heart from despair,
it is hope.

Resurrection is love unwrapped,
dancing in the breeze
and free to go wherever it is needed,
touching us, embracing us
and reminding us that life goes on.