

Progressive Voices



Dec 2022, PV43

8th September 2022

**'My kingdom is not of this world'.
Jesus' answer to a questioning Pilate.**

The truth of that statement sinks deeply into my very being today,
as we reflect on the death of Queen Elizabeth
after such a long, dedicated life.

The instantly winging responses are deservedly world-wide:

Tributes and memories

Flowers

Crowds

Laying in state

Funeral plans

Immense sadness and thanksgiving ...

What a contrast with the Jesus so rapidly crucified,
accused of claiming to be a king:

A cross

A hasty linen-wrapped burial by two men watched by a few women

A borrowed rock tomb

Sealed and guarded –

lest a stolen body might challenge the finality of death.

No procession

No religious service

No obituaries ...

And yet -

the death of that 'king' two thousand plus years ago
influenced the life, words, and actions of our Queen –
and millions of others, down through the centuries,
across the globe
and continues, unabated,
as each committed person, high or lowly
contributes to making our world a better place.

Jesus' words were so true.

'My kingdom is not of this world'.

Not indeed in earthly terms of wealth, power, status,
but undefeatably demonstrating,
in that spiritual reality which we call eternity
that 'king' Jesus, through the power of God's Holy Spirit,
here and now and yet to come
is indeed a king.

Ros Murphy

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Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions, are all welcome. Publication is at the editor's discretion:
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Front Cover Image:

David Coaker, Olive tree: Al- Khader, West Bank, 16.10.2022

Welcome

As the weather turns more wintry, the summer does begin to feel a long time ago. It has been an eventful few months since I worked my way through all of the contributions about what PCN means to you and we offered a promotional edition to the folk that gathered at Greenbelt. Thanks to all of you, especially as the volume of contributions meant I had to be quite ruthless in the edit. Having said that, there are some leftover items that didn't totally fit into the remit, so they have been included in this edition.

Elsewhere we reflect on our own politics, and that of the Middle East. God, both Unknowing, Unreachable, and as encountered in the Open Table Network's national gathering. We reflect on gratitude, Jesus' teachings and life after death. Sarah shares her thoughts on her, and PCN's, experience at Greenbelt. There is also the encouragement to buy an olive tree, and make use of an Advent Candle liturgy to encourage others to do as well. All this alongside the usual mix of poetry, updates, news and reviews that a 'normal' edition of PV entails!

Welcome to the 43rd edition of PV. Enjoy!

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Chair's Letter

As I write this letter the news of Bishop Steven Croft's essay concerning same sex marriage is still breaking across the media, both in its traditional and 'social' forms. Perhaps it's on social media that the response is least filtered – coming out in 'hot takes' of one sort or another, some of which descend immediately to the level of accusation and name calling. Angry claims that one person is a 'false prophet' or a 'bad shepherd' or even a 'liar' are then countered by passive aggressive responses talking about the way that 'bigoted' responses evidence a lack of love.

This kind of discourse, which seems to rapidly drop to the level of insult and invective, is a symptom of the kind of social divides that characterise contemporary society. We don't seem to know how to disagree without building walls between each other, and lobbing bricks over them. If we're honest, we who consider ourselves 'progressive' can be just as bad about this as anyone. We readily set up lines between 'us' and 'them' – whether that's 'liberal and conservative' or 'progressive and fundamentalist' and even if we don't get aggressive, we can sometimes find ourselves talking somewhat condescendingly about the way that 'they' see the world, in all its inadequate simplicity.

Complexity

Inevitably, though, the truth is far more complex: labels are a poor way of defining who and what we are, never mind how we think. Once we begin to label ourselves, or others, we start to limit the possibilities available to us for finding common ground. In his recent book 'Still Crazy' (review p.13-14 the veteran (evangelical) author Adrian Plass* makes a throwaway remark about loathing 'badges'. I found this interesting, because badges are a tool which are used to do a particular job, they serve to identify the person. We've been taught to look for a badge when someone comes to the door: No badge? Well then, you're not coming in to read my electric meter! Plass though, doesn't want a badge, perhaps because he somehow intuits the limitation that it implies. Once you have a badge, your identity is demarcated, you are defined, you are, to some extent, limited.

For members and supporters of PCN we must acknowledge that we are doubly badged or defined, first as 'progressive' and also as 'Christian'. The first word, we'd probably seek to argue, helps to explain or give shape to the second. Our approach to, or sense of, Christianity is a progressive one, the opposite, perhaps, of conservative. What we know, though, is that this doesn't mean we can't ever make common cause with those who situate themselves in the conservative rather than progressive camp. In fact, what we also know is that

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most of us aren't 'purely' one thing or another: many Christian people who take a progressive approach to the sorts of issues that the Bishop of Oxford has written about take, what I would consider to be, a rather conservative approach to other things. Perhaps the same sort of thing is true of me too, maybe in ways I'm presently unaware of.

Privilege

In trying to approach the idea of respectful disagreement I have to acknowledge my own privilege. I'm not in any of the groups trying to ask for basic levels of inclusion, for instance. Nobody stood in the way of me getting married, nor getting an education, nor indeed any of the other things that are denied to subsets of people simply on the grounds of who they are. It's easier for me to respectfully disagree with someone when they're not directly attempting to deny my rights, or even my humanity. It's considerably harder for those who are on the receiving end of hatred or intolerance, which is perhaps why individuals who manage, somehow, to hoist themselves above the parapets and extend a hand towards those who want to deny their rights, or even to actively harm them, seem so remarkable.

I don't have a simple answer to the sorts of problems this issue of how to disagree poses. I am not even sure there is a 'right' answer to be found. I'm encouraged by the sort of approach that Bishop Steven has taken, just as I'm saddened by the level of discussion that has surrounded it. Although I don't know, altogether, how we do this, my sense is that we must learn, together, to disagree well and that perhaps the task for progressives is to lead the way in this.

My original plan for an interviewee for this edition fell through when she became unexpectedly unavailable. This gap was filled almost as *unexpectedly when the publishers of Adrian Plass'* new book offered the author for interview.

Although I'm wary of platforming yet another white man, I was intrigued by what this stalwart of the evangelical church might have to say to those of us of a progressive persuasion... I hope you find it interesting too.

Olive Picking

The last time I visited Israel / Palestine was over twenty years ago as I waited to hear whether I would be accepted into preparation for United Reformed Church ministry. We visited the holy sites and Christian Aid projects, which gave me a sense of the Palestinian context, but my abiding memory is a sense of peace and affirmation sitting on the shore of Galilee after a boat trip across the lake.

After my visit this Oct, with an Embrace the Middle East group (<https://embraceme.org/>) from across the UK to pick olives with East Jerusalem YMCA, I'm left with different memories. There was joy in the shared experience and the welcome we received from Palestinian families to assist with their harvest. We carried stepladders, tarpaulins and buckets up and down valleys. Heard the satisfying patter of olives falling to the ground, and then filling sacks to the brim. We celebrated communion in olive groves. Shared stories with farmers, their families, teenage Palestinians, and each other. There was light in those moments of solidarity and shared effort.

There were also shadows - as walls and fences were noticed, armed patrols passed by and, to our eyes the unassuming apartment blocks on the surrounding hills were pointed out as Israeli settlements. Over twenty years ago the situation was tense, it was shortly after the Oslo accords, but now what seemed temporary checkpoints are transformed into military outposts, the separation barrier looms around and through communities, settlements (better described as new towns) seem everywhere, new Israeli-only roads cut through the West Bank, and the more than seventy-year occupation to me, and more importantly: Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the B'Tselem among others, is more accurately described as apartheid (www.kairopalestine.ps/index.php/resources/publication/a-dossier-on-israeli-apartheid-a-pressing-call-to-churches-around-the-world).

We had talks from the campaign for Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), the BADIL Resource Centre, an advisor to the Palestinian Authority, an Israeli activist, the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem, Kairos Palestine, the Palestinian Museum of Natural History, and the YMCA's Rehabilitation Programme. We visited Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Hebron, visiting settlements and seized Palestinian homes, taking in the holy and tourist sites and enjoyed a farewell dinner with folk dancing.

After this visit my abiding memories are different. On my previous trip we also visited the al-Aqsa Mosque / Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Then there was the expected security at the bottom of the slope before we entered, but that was all. This time armed Israeli security was also at the top of the slope



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within the Mosque compound, they were also patrolling the grounds and escorting settlers around it. I was lost for words. Imagine police patrolling around a cathedral and escorting people around it who contest its sacredness? It was even more stark when we visited Hebron. The tourist traps of the glass and keffiyeh factories were in sharp contrast to the city centre where the main street lies abandoned, with shop doors welded shut, as a security precaution for the settlers who have made their homes there. It was incredibly eerie and unsettling to walk the deserted street with only teenage soldiers for company.

Yet within all this the Palestinians we met still had hope. (The theme for this year's olive picking being, Keep Hope Alive.) There were diverse opinions about whether that hope lies in a one or two-state solution or by challenging the status quo as apartheid. There was pain in the stories of routine harassment, night-time arrests, imprisonment, loss of land and inequality. There was also compassion for their oppressors, wondering how they cope being fed a constant diet of fear. There was also joy in celebrating the everyday things of life.

Apart from a general sense of the Palestinian plight the only lasting legacy from my previous trip had been to always include prayers for Israel/Palestine in the intercessions I led. This time I made a list of things to do, questions to ask, times to share my experiences, a commitment to support Embrace, and an abiding affection for olive trees – especially when they are in need of picking!

This trip to pick olives was delayed by lockdowns, but before the pandemic I did put together an Advent candle liturgy to promote congregations purchasing olive trees. (<https://breakingopenthewordblog.wordpress.com/2019/11/05/advent-candle-liturgy-olive-tree-project/>)

I offer it to you to encourage the same, and share the opening verse of the hymn:

The olive tree against the sky
strong and healthy as time goes by.
The olive tree means life and health
to those who tend and till the earth.
They connect us to ages gone,
and keep watch over ages to come.

(Sussex Carol, LM Irregular
– On Christmas night all Christians sing)

God in the midst

Reflecting on the Open Table Network's national gathering

PhD researcher Mel Jones, whose research features stories from members of Open Table communities for LGBTQIA+ Christians, led a *breakout group on 'mapping sacred space' at the Open Table Network national gathering in June. Here Mel reflects on how the event was so much more than another research opportunity.*

Sitting on the train, with a copy of Henri Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*, I try and focus to read, but my excitement and thoughts are facing northward. My anticipation as a researcher fills me, as I once again mentally prep myself for the workshop I will give later that day. The deep excitement within me bubbles up as I prayerfully dream about what might happen today. I read the words of Morning Prayer:

'The night has passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind'.

My train is delayed and I arrive in Leyland later than expected. The tower of St Ambrose's Church stands a stone's throw from the train tracks, peering over a row of houses. As I enter the church hall it's already buzzing with activity, and I crack a smile to see community so easily and excitedly coming together.

Somewhat naively, I suppose, I started my PhD expecting to follow a career in academia; closing the lid on a call to ordination in the church. As I have delved more into the research I have increasingly realised that God cannot be boxed, and a sense of calling has a habit of catching up with you wherever you go.

Then I realised and learnt to accept that this too is vocational work. God finds us in the everyday things of life. Our work, whatever it may be, is used by God and God speaks through it all whenever we are willing to listen.

Having spent many months processing my own sense of calling, catching up once again, and learning not to fight as much to disentangle these parts of my multi-faceted holiness, I arrive at the Open Table national gathering as a bundle of this sacred messiness; and once again the Open Table community holds all of me as I am. My expectations of the day move from just thinking about the research and the workshop; my soul speaks - God has something for me today.



The table set for the closing communion service

In the closing communion service the joy of the moment mixes with tears as we pass the chalice round in a circle. 'Jesus' blood shed for you', my queer, trans body says as I pass the small goblet to the lesbian minister in front of me. I can't stop myself from tearing up as my body, mind and soul recognise the significance of the moment. My head buzzes with the ways I could write about these moments in my research. My heart overflows as I find a space where my whole self is involved in worship. My soul stirs at acknowledging that the moment was a nudge from the Holy Spirit, as a whisper flows into my thoughts; 'this is your calling, my boy'. For a split moment I am caught daydreaming about the day I shall be ordained. Then, I catch a glimpse from across the room of an Open Table member I had only met online. She laughs at me, and then we get stuck in a giggle match, avoiding looking at each other so we don't break into more laughter.

God is here, in the midst of us. God in the midst of the queer. God in the midst of the trans. God in the midst of the gay, the bi, the straight, the non-binary. God in the midst of the messy, undecided, unsure. God in the midst of the broken, the bold, and the downright beautiful.

I reflect back on *The Wounded Healer*. At The Open Table national gathering I see the goodness of God move in a messy and holy community, filled with people whose stories I have been gifted the honour of hearing as part of my research.

In those small moments throughout the day I see the fruits of the labour of those wounded healers.

I am honoured to be counted among them. God, present in the midst of us.

The Open Table Network (OTN) is a growing partnership of communities across England & Wales which welcome and affirm people who are: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, & Asexual (LGBTQIA)
www.opentable.lgbt



Sovereignty and Subsidiarity

Our First Past the Post (FPTP) system is often commended above Proportional Representation (PR) in that FPTP allows diverse political opinions to form alliances within the main parties, which can then make political proposal in manifestos. The argument is made that this gives the elected governments a mandate to advance their manifesto commitments. The 'manifesto mandate argument'. By contrast, in PR there can be more parties which all make manifestos, but then afterwards they may need to compromise their vision according to the weight of the vote, as political alliances are entered into to enable a majority to form a government.

However, our experience in recent years has undermined this manifesto mandate argument for FPTP, for this is not how the parties function. The left-leaning Labour leader Jeremy Corbin was undermined by the Parliamentary Labour Party - as admitted in the Forde Inquiry report (The work of the Labour Party's Governance and Legal Unit in relation to antisemitism, 2014-2019) and further exposed in an Al Jazeera investigation into the "anti-Semitism" spin against some Palestine supporters critical of the politics of apartheid in Israel. More recently, the divisions in the Conservative Party meant that a Neoliberal pro-Brexit wing of the party formed the government, with support of Party members for Liz Truss. It proposed the notorious "mini budget", which was not in line with manifesto commitments, and led to the falling apart of that parliamentary party and the downfall of the PM.

An alternative pro-FPTP argument is that it allows for local representation, in which the local MP can hear and fight for the local constituency. The 'local representation argument'. But this is misleading too, for we see the pressure, coercion and even bullying by Party Whips to force MPs to vote against local opinion, and even personal conscience, to support what is sometimes against party manifesto commitments and even other international political and environmental agreements. Backbenchers have very little power over a government. A recent vote on fracking illustrates how this vote became a vote of confidence in the government and so about loyalty to party and not constituency, manifesto, or, indeed, an MP's integrity. Our recent experiences, therefore, knock down these FPTP arguments.

Both the manifesto mandate argument and the local representation argument are advanced with the impression that power lies with the people, either the national electorate or the local area, in bringing issues of concern to the attention of the MP. These are commended on the theological principles of sovereignty and subsidiarity that emerged in reforming non-conformist religious movements, and are found in philosophers such as Rousseau, and



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continue to influence the churches, as in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). One of the pro-Brexit myths was that we could reclaim sovereignty, so that the national electorate and national and regional governments could decide policies. In spite of the reality that these ideas have been misused to mask where power really lies, electoral sovereignty and subsidiarity are both progressive theological ideas. But money is where power really lies in our politics. The theological justification of FPTP is undermined by the influence of money. Power isn't negotiated by the consensus of sovereign individuals and communities, emerging through the rational debate envisioned in the Enlightenment move from religion to reason. Sovereignty lies with the markets, the 'think tanks' and other financially supported pressure groups, which put pressure on MPs and parties. Sovereignty lies with the media-moguls which shape the direction of public debates that influence public opinion. The narratives they spin criticize unions and environmental protestors for the inconvenience they cause, mock term like 'Woke' and 'anti-growth', and present immigration as a 'problem' (rather than a helpful contribution).

The theological legitimising of individual sovereignty of the electorate and local subsidiarity has masked the reality that economic inequality and the power of money undermines democracy and has undermined the possibility of forming community and consensus.

Any electoral reform therefore needs to dethrone the god of money, before considering if a form of Proportional Representation better serves the principles of electoral sovereignty and subsidiarity.

A PR system in which the funding of parties is transparent would allow the public to observe an open debate by parties which had a mandate to enter into dialogue with the weighted support of the electorate. It will not be entirely resistant to the mogul-funded media frenzies over disagreements, and so a politically independent BBC would help. But it will at least help shift sovereignty back to the people and to local communities.

A further question for us is how can we engage in social values and political vision, exploring diversity and yet helping form a vision of the Common Good, given that progressive visions are minority voices on today's world? While we should challenge the god of money, what theological resources do we have to help reform our political debate?

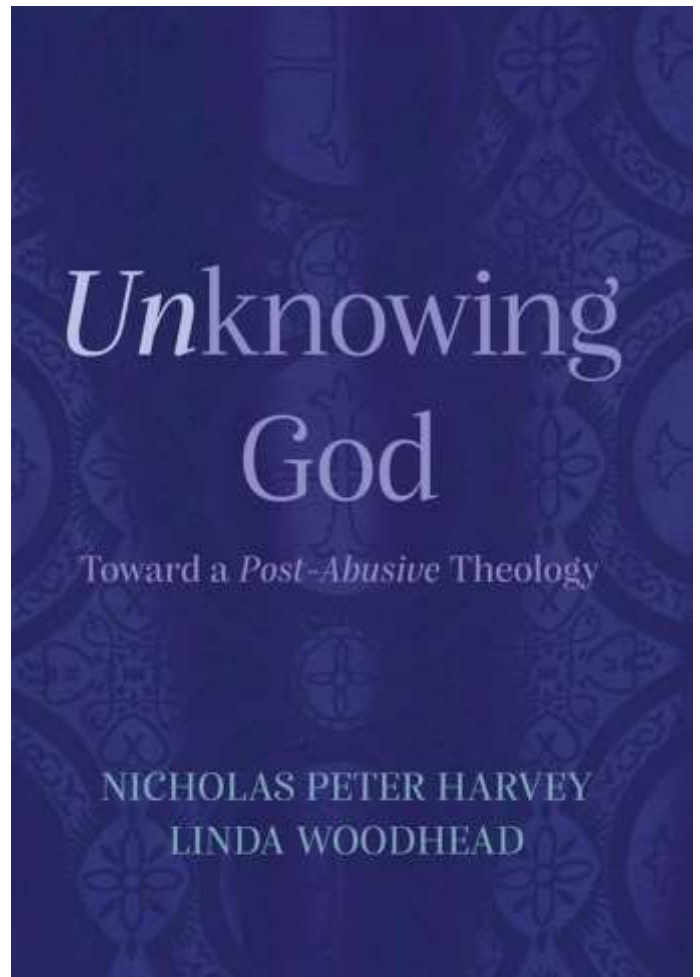
Unknowing God

Unknowing God: Toward a Post-abusive Theology, by Nicholas Peter Harvey and Linda Woodhead, Cascade Books

When Linda invited me to write a book with her neither of us anticipated that it would take over thirty years to complete. This period has proved perhaps the most interesting in the life of both our Churches in modern times, in terms of revealing underlying habits of thought and practice and pin-pointing unfinished business. Each Church has been seriously subverted at the level of credibility by the scale and continuance of the clerical sexual abuse crisis. The big picture suggests that this difficulty is a major symptom of an entrenched and yet largely unnoticed abuse of power. Each Church has demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, that it has an abusive power-structure, even though the Church of England has elements of democracy and downward accountability which my Church lacks. Our book is explicit that the problem is theological, with the implication that what keeps our abusive power-structures in business is an abusive image of God, what Linda calls the omni-God still pervasive in Christian attitudes, at least in theory.

The book is exploratory in tone, discursive, inviting a conversation to which no end is in sight. Surveys suggest that if present trends continue both our Churches will have ceased to exist, at least in the west, in fifty years' time. We have no reform programme, but are concerned here with those elements of Christian belief and practice which fail to point in a life-enhancing direction. We have both served on Church committees at national level, and have lived and taught in theological colleges, consorting with prelates. We are thus no strangers to the supposedly higher echelons of Church life, and by no means free of collusion with the unregenerate ways we seek to identify here. Alongside this familiarity Linda's theological outlook has been radically changed by serious engagement with sociology, which theology has often proved too arrogant to take seriously. For me history and psychology play a similar role in providing lenses enabling me to keep the big picture in sight. We think very differently from each other in some ways, which is why each reflection is headed by one or other set of initials, but there are many significantly convergent points.

Many Christians seem to be sleep-walking in face of these troublesome and disturbing matters. The death of Hilary Mantel has re-activated controversy about the character of Thomas More, who my generation of Catholics were brought up to believe was a heroic and saintly figure who thought Catholicism was worth dying for. He did think thus, but what is missing or at best seriously underplayed



in this account is that he also thought it was worth killing for, as manifested in his judicial proceedings against wretched Lollards quite unable to cope with his honed forensic skill and cold ruthlessness as Lord Chancellor. What is it that enables us humans not to notice uncomfortable things? A dramatic contemporary example of this ability not to see what is staring us in the face is that of a nun who formed part of the team recommending to the Republican party Donald Trump's candidacy for re-election as President. This, said the nun, is the most pro-life President we have ever had, as if nothing else needed to be said.

Some might regard our emphasis on unknowing as negative, but it reflects the mystical tradition that all images of God teeter on the edge of idolatry, and have therefore in the long run to be unlearned if we are to receive the abundance. In parallel with this is the suggestion implicit in our title that the all-knowing God of classical Christian tradition does more harm than good. Such a God, if taken seriously, blunts creativity, reducing us to pygmies and puppets. In other words we are engaged in an indispensable and urgent ground-clearing exercise preparatory to further chapters in the human quest for meaning and purpose. We desperately need a more grown-up God.

Nicholas Peter Harvey

Gratitude

November, season of mellow fruitfulness, melds into December, and the season of anticipation. In the US these two encompass, broadly speaking, the season of Thanksgiving.

American Thanksgiving is, for some of us, a somewhat confusing time, given that the original Thanksgiving that it recalls has to do with the appropriation of lands and the often-brutal expulsion of indigenous people, as well as being an agrarian festival in its own right. The turkey tradition, begun in November and then resumed in late December, has its origins in the hunting of the wild turkeys that abounded in the countryside of that fertile and still only partially conquered country. The earliest of Thanksgiving prayers recall gratitude for the land and for the safe arrival of the remaining Pilgrims, as well as for 'the many and signal favours of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness' (President George Washington's First Thanksgiving Proclamation.) Only fifty-three of the Pilgrims who had set out from Plymouth survived their first winter (1620-1621). They owed their lives in no small measure to the hospitality of the Wampanoag tribe of what is now Massachusetts. They had much to be thankful for.

All of this begs the question of how much we need to know about what we are being thankful for. It is easy to pass judgment, with the wisdom of hindsight, on the merits or demerits of a thanksgiving that involved conquest and, later, enslavement and the general deification of ownership. But the difference between right and wrong can take many generations to learn, as it also does in the case of any one lifetime. To this end, recall the prayer of the Pharisee 'I am thankful that I am not like this other man'. Are we not often secretly thankful that we are not like our forebears?

How will future generations judge us, then, in regard to the things we take for granted now? It would be inaccurate to say that we give thanks for them, since in our materialist and acquisitive society we are rarely truly thankful for the things society gives



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us, including the changes in the mores and expectations of the times we live in, whether these have to do with how we view our possessions or the specific fields or industry in which we work. As a writer, I find myself grateful for the women writers of previous centuries whose work, and whose gifts, went unnoticed, or who had to adopt a man's name in order to get published. I am deeply humbled by them and grateful to them for their faith in their own calling and specific gifts. This is where there is a connection between the idea of thankfulness and the legacies, whatever form they take, of previous generations. We become one people and this unity across time links us to the source of Love itself.

Love, as the source and expression of thankfulness, does not ask to be named, although, as a Christian, I find myself 'constrained' to name it in words of gratitude. The idea of constraint, used in the context of gratitude, is quite separate from the idea of duty, although the two are easily confused. We are 'constrained' by love because it 'pulls' at that element within ourselves which longs for the deepest kind of dialogue or exchange, the giving and receiving of itself with another. Duty alone, unless it is motivated by love, is at best its own reward. We feel good about having done our duty and look down on those who fail to do theirs. But when duty is performed as the 'constraint' of love it becomes sacrificial in the fullest sense of the word, the giving over of the self for the sake of another. Sacrificial love returns the person to a God who gave his Son, not out of a sense of duty, even the duty to hold true to a promise, but out of the willingness to be vulnerable, so that we in turn could be vulnerable to God.

To say 'thank you' for anything is to be vulnerable to those people or events that have liberated us in some way. The season of Thanksgiving, as it leads into the season of expectation and the fulfilment of promise, is a time for allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to gratitude, to own consciously those people, ideas, or events that have in some measure liberated us from any kind of servitude. This is where the man who was praying alongside the Pharisee found himself. He realised, in one of those rare moments, that he was in need of freedom, or perhaps was already experiencing it secretly and giving thanks for it in words and in thoughts that the Pharisee, and many of us today, have forgotten.



Page 65 of 'Young Folks' history of the United States' (1893) Public Domain <https://www.flickr.com/photos/interstate/v/14590991228>

No Damascus Road

No Damascus Road for me, I'm afraid. "I searched for God among the Christians and on the Cross and therein I found Him not. I went into the ancient temples of idolatry; no trace of Him was there. I entered the mountain cave of Hira and then went as far as Qandhar but God I found not. With set purpose I fared to the summit of Mount Caucasus and found there only 'anqa's habitation. Then I directed my search to the Kaaba, the resort of old and young; God was not there even. Turning to philosophy I inquired about him from ibn Sina but found Him not within his range. I fared then to the scene of the Prophet's experience of a great divine manifestation only a "two bow-lengths' distance from him" but God was not there even in that exalted court. Finally, I looked into my own heart and there I saw Him; He was nowhere else." Jalaluddin Rumi (1206–1273)

Likewise I have not experienced an external supernatural, but accept an internal spirituality that is part of human nature. If you place a label on me, it's Christian but not religious. It was not ever thus. My non-religious parents, born during the reign of the Empress of India, made me into a little Anglican at the font of St Mary Magdalene, Newark on Trent. After moving to Hampshire, then 6, I was sent to a Baptist Sunday School, where I sang: 'Jesus died for all the children, All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white they are equal in His sight. Jesus died for all the children of the world.' Later, I transferred my allegiance to the parish church where I was confirmed and became a server and a bellringer. Being brought up to obey authority without question, I believed all the doctrine of the Church of England to ensure my soul's salvation.

At university I joined the Anglican Society and attended lectures on "Prophecy in the Old Testament" and the fields of Biblical criticism opened before me. I bought a copy of "The Gospels in Parallel" and found it fascinating. One day Fr Trevor Huddleston gave an extremely moving talk on his struggles against South African apartheid. Suddenly starkly realising that deep faith requires action against social injustice, I joined Christian Action and the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Next, as a National Service infantry officer I was posted to Nigeria. After completing my service, Joan and I married and we returned to Nigeria to work in agricultural research. In Zaria the colonial church of St Andrew's had no clergy so a group of Anglicans, Baptists, Brethren and Church of Scotland had to organise our own services. This was a first at giving a sermon and mercifully I cannot remember the topics of my amateur homilies. The other important learning experience was to live among a majority Moslem society, from whom I learnt much.

Fourteen years later back in Sheffield, St John's, Ranmoor was our parish church. A parish project, "Affluence and Poverty in Sheffield" had a profound effect and after another 14 years we returned to Nigeria with Voluntary Service Overseas. After 6 months I lost most of my sight, but VSO gave me the chance to return to Nigeria to find out if I could cope. After 4 years with support from Joan and many others, I completed my contract. Working in development was another great experience.

Back in Sheffield in 2000 we attended the day conference given by Marcus Borg. His impressive scholarship made sense of Jesus' life and teaching. To explore this approach further, a group was set up and still flourishes as the Sheffield PCN Group.

What I have heard and read gives me not a doctrinal belief but a firm faith in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. So, I do my best to fulfil Matthew 25: 35-41, which is enough for me.

Robin Story

Blocked

Take a look at this pebble. One might see right through but it is blocked at one end by a piece of petrified wood. For decades I prayed with this pebble as a token of my battle with 'weak' faith and poor mental health.



"Lord, let me see what is blocking me from seeing you. What is wrong with me? Why do you reject me? Why am I evil? Unblock the hole so I can see through clearly", I begged year after year. Ultimately, Jobian family crises pushed my faith beyond snapping point. It's terrifying being a baby atheist, with the albatross of the fear of Hell hanging around one's neck.

After some years of drought I stumbled upon Tim Yeager's 'Galilee' course, an Alpha-style online group approaching the gospel from a progressive angle. Here I was taught an altogether different model of Christianity, based on love not gaslighting. Finally I realised that the blockage was not my sin or lack of faith, it was my faith itself.

I'm still far from convinced with these new concepts and remain atheist agnostic. However, PCN provides me with a safe, gentle, loving community to explore with integrity and without judgement.

Neil Perry

Start a Religion

“Someone should start a religion based on the teachings of Jesus.” This anonymous meme appeared recently in Facebook and in my opinion, this meme identifies the precise problem with Christianity. The religion, as it is practised, bears little resemblance to Christ’s instructions, as recorded in the New Testament.

The core message Jesus gave was a beautiful, simple phrase: “Feed my sheep.” This instruction encapsulates the loving care and kindness that Jesus wanted the Apostles to model throughout society, as they set out to spread the Word.

To set the parameters for their mission, Jesus had already reduced Ten Commandments to two, (“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”) I would go even further, because lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, are at the root of many of the mental and physical health problems that block our relationship with God.

- Love yourself – because God lives in your heart.
- Love your neighbour - because everyone is.

If you love yourself and love your neighbour, you are living your life the way it’s meant to be lived. You could call it ‘Christian’ - but you don’t have to – I believe it’s just the right way to live.

The apostles set off on their loving journey, on a mission that contrasts sharply with the evangelical Christian rallies of the past hundred years and more. Even today the liturgy labels us ‘... not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table’ and the message from the pulpit often follows a similar theme. It is a message of human unworthiness, and our need to be “saved” because of our natural sinful nature. I believe this is rubbish.

I fail to understand how anyone can hold such beliefs, when the Bible makes it clear that we are all made in the image of God. Ignoring this, Christianity classifies us as guilty inheritors of Original Sin, complete with Adam and Eve, and nudity. Given the fairy-tale of that context, anyone can understand why so many reject the Church. But why would anyone choose to reject the teachings of Jesus?

Once we see through the superficial messages of materialism that suffocate our world today, we realise that much commercial propaganda, just like the Church, constantly portrays us as inadequate. Advertising insists that we need to make ourselves acceptable members of society by raising our status and acquiring extravagant trinkets to enhance our image. For women, the recipe seems to be beauty and fashion; and for men a shiny new car.

It’s time for us to come to our senses and realise that we need no frippery to endorse our value as human beings. We are enough, just as we are.



R J Harvey is an oblate of the multifaith Monastery & Ashram of the Holy Trinity at Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu, South India.

We are all-powerful in the knowledge that God is not an old man in a nightie, sitting on the clouds. God lives much closer than that. God lives in every one of us, and our purpose on Earth is to project that godliness every day, in the way we live our lives, and in the way that we treat everyone with whom we come into contact.

Our example is enough. We simply need to seek to live the life that Jesus promoted. He couched it both in parables and in straight talk, and he demonstrated it in his behaviour. If we endeavour to live according to his teachings, then we are the Church, the community of people doing their best to live good lives.

Don’t go to a building on Sundays to demonstrate your beliefs. Get out and make your hometown a better place to live. Stop in the street to chat with someone who is sitting in a doorway, homeless. Help a refugee who has escaped violence in his home country and is trying to learn English and integrate his family into our community. Volunteer to work in a charity shop, a food bank or a community kitchen. Teach people who missed out on their education. Explain the basics of arithmetic so they can avoid money problems, and help them with their reading and writing.

Drink tea and empathise – British people are good at that, so play to your strengths.

If you want to change the world, there are a thousand ways you can make it happen. Live like an apostle. The apostles just followed the example of Jesus, and took his instructions seriously.

Stop worshipping Jesus – the apostles never did that: they worshipped God.

If you love yourself and love your neighbours, people could call you a Christian – but you don’t have to wear that label. You don’t have to sit on a pew every Sunday and sing awful, sentimental Victorian hymns. Nor do you have to recite a demanding creed that’s written in antiquated language.

Christianity has very few rules: almost everything is optional; only find God in your heart and soul, and live life the way we’re meant to. We are called to be kind, to be caring and to be neighbourly. Just be the best person you can.

It’s not much to ask, and the job-satisfaction is enormous.

Interview: Adrian Plass

Simon Cross speaks to Adrian Plass following the publication of his latest book: *Still crazy* (Hodder & Stoughton)

For many people Adrian Plass will always be the ‘sacred diarist’ a religious humourist who poked



gentle fun at a particular kind of, or approach to, religious life. He did that as an insider, never shy of admitting his evangelicalism or of declaring his commitment to a particular kind of Christian orthodoxy. Now, in his eight decade and well established as a prolific author and speaker Plass has written a new book in which he says he

can at last ‘be honest’ about what he really thinks.

It’s an intriguing text: like so many others, Plass appears to have trodden the well-worn path from a small ‘c’ conservative Christianity to a kind of openness, embracing a more questioning, less certain approach to his faith. But it’s clear that there remains a real tension in him between wanting to cling to that orthodoxy, or the security that it seems to offer, and being genuinely true to his experience. In this interview Plass says that the relief of finally ‘being honest’ is enormous but admits his fear of straying too far from the orthodoxy of his tradition.

“Finally, at this stage in my life, I’m able to tell the truth about what I believe, and what I don’t believe in, and how I feel about God and all the other stuff. I told a lot of lies when I was younger and now, well, I am finally able to be honest about what’s happening to me, and I can say, honestly, that it makes such a huge difference.

I remember years ago, going to a meeting, and the preacher, he was an evangelist, and he did a talk in which he said, ‘I don’t worry, because I belong to God. I belong to God, so I don’t worry. Why should I worry when I belong to God?’ And afterwards, he came up and said, ‘I’m really worried. I don’t think I got through to the congregation at all.’ And I said: ‘You just told them a million times you don’t worry.’ And he replied, ‘Oh, well, I was preaching then.’ He felt that he couldn’t be honest. And I don’t in any way blame him for that, everybody was doing it and a lot of people still do it, and I understand why... because often God isn’t around.

I remember thinking that if I ever manage it, I would love to be able to stand up and tell the truth about what’s happening to me.

A lot of Christians want to be like that girl in *The Railway Children* standing on the platform and saying: “Daddy, my daddy!” And the mist clears and there he is. That’s the great dream for many, many, Christians that we meet, but it’s not the reality.

I remember at the beginning of the pandemic there was a big church in London... I’m sure that they obviously meant well, but they were shouting ‘faith, not fear!’ Well, that just seemed ridiculous.

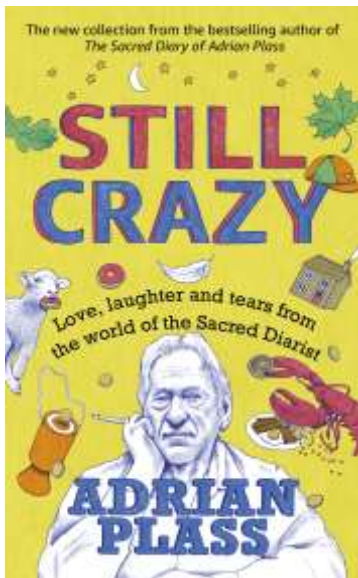
There were a thousand things to fear: it was awful. Seeing people dying, knowing your parents, or you, might any minute have a hideous thing put on you and you’d be in agony and all that stuff. Of course, the church has been like a field hospital during that time with people failing and falling and feeling sick and dying, whatever. The idea of Jesus walking in and saying, ‘on your feet lads, you don’t stay on your bed when I come in!’ is just so utterly ludicrous.

I think one of the problems was and still is that there’s an awful lot of thanking God for things God hasn’t done for us. There’s a bit in Malachi, or ‘malarkey’ as someone wonderfully called it once in one of our meetings, ‘a little bit of malarkey at the end of the Old Testament never did anyone any harm did it?’ There’s a bit that talks about false fire on the altar, and I think that’s what happens if things go wrong, or you’re feeling a bit low, you build it up, you build the fire up. But if that fire is not genuine, it doesn’t actually do any good... It’s such a relief to be able to embrace that reality now.

“there’s an awful lot of thanking God for things God hasn’t done for us...”

One of the things that I have found really difficult is because Christianity is actually quite difficult, or can be, there can be a drift, towards leaders, assemblers, who say, well, it doesn’t matter what you are, or what quite what you believe, just come in. I’ve always felt that if I step too far away from the orthodox theology of evangelical Christianity, I’m going to go terribly wrong. But I also thought that if I begin to understand orthodox theology as meaning something as stiff and boring and inscrutable and unpleasant, as it seems to me when people talk about it, then I’m equally wrong. And to be honest I still don’t quite know how to sort that tension out.

I have to say, though, personally, I have over recent years, I’ve come to really like God and I think also, to feel that I think God likes me too... and thank



God for that. I mean, to be loved and not liked... what an appalling prospect.

But I still think the workings of God are so weird, they defy our best explanations.

There's a poem I wrote about a dog that died, a real dog, a lovely dog, a Great Dane. And on the day that he died someone said to me, 'do you think he's in heaven, the dog?' And well, orthodoxy really

says, you know, dogs, animals don't have souls and won't be in heaven. So, I wrote this poem where, on the day of the death there was a meeting in heaven about animals being allowed in. And they talked forever and the angels very dutifully say, well, they don't have souls and all that. And God sits there and says nothing and then in the last verse, he says 'I propose that next month we continue to talk, but dusk is fast falling, the hillside is calling, and Buddy is needing a walk.'

I think that is one of the most profound visions of the strange lovingness and ingenuity and creativity of God that I've been privileged to receive.

It's like a story about St Francis: in the middle of the night, he hears one of the brothers crying and he goes to see him, and he says, I'm just so hungry, and so fed up with it all. So, Francis gets all the food together that they've got in the place, and the two of them eat it all in the middle of the night. And then in the morning, they go back to their vows. I think that you can never out guess God. And I'm excited about that, actually, the possibility it offers.

I don't think the Bible is a very warm book, really, I mean, it's not EastEnders, is it? One of the things in my book is a conversation in a pub with Peter after I die – so I'm sitting with Peter, and he's talking about his encounters with Jesus. I really wanted to explore how he might have felt being with Jesus, I think it would have been a very human relationship. I think we've lost sight of the humanity of Jesus, the fact that he truly was a man.

“we've lost sight of the humanity of Jesus...”

G.K. Chesterton said that the three words that both Christians and non-Christians find impossible to accept are: he became man. How can that ridiculous paradox be true? And yet he was man, and in the end, success looks like failure. He was crucified. So, success or failure, depending on how you look at it: paradoxes abound.

To be totally honest, I am like a small child with God now. I'm not grown up anymore. I can't believe in those things that become inflated within me about my faith and things.

“I am like a small child with God now...”

And I still find myself saying to God, quite a lot, 'I just want to do something: just give me things, little or big, I'd like big ones, but little ones are fine, and let me do them. So that when I wake up in the morning, I think there'll be something for me to do today.' And then every now and then, I want to say 'piss off' to everything and don't want to do anything and that's just who I am.

But actually, owning that as a follower is really difficult, because we want to succeed, and we want to do some things.

I remember meeting a lady in, I think it was New Zealand. You know, for me, there's always the danger that people are going to say something horrible to me. But this lady came up to me, and she had a very straight face – looked very serious and said, 'I want to talk to you about something' I said 'yes', she said: 'My father went into hospital with a terminal illness a while ago, he has died now. But while he was dying, he was very nervous about his faith, asking things like, was he praying right? Was he going to heaven? Was his theology correct? So, I gave him your book, The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass.' And in saying all this, she still hadn't smiled. So, I said: 'Well, what did he make of that?' And this is one of the high points of my entire writing career, she said: 'Adrian... he laughed himself to death!' She told me that every time he got low, he picked the book up, and he read a bit. And he realised that it didn't matter, all that stuff, because what he took from the book is that God is actually very loving.

If that had been the only response I'd ever got, I think it would do.

Someone asked me the other day: 'what are the three things that inform your life now?' Well having thought about it, I realise that they all begin with 'W' for some peculiar reason. One is that I'm very wary, very wary indeed. The other is to be warm, and the other is to be willing to do whatever turns out to be right. Whether it is something I agree with or not. In other words, I suppose, to be follower of Christ without knowing quite where I'm going.

That is the problem, I think with lots of ministry, as it's called. That people know where they're going. When you read the New Testament, you'll see nobody knew where they were going and instead, they just went where Jesus went. At this point in my life, I'm content with trying to do that.”

Florence

On holiday recently we visited the cathedral in Florence, an enormous building and very gloomy inside. It really was quite dark and echoey-quiet. And, unlike many other churches and cathedrals we've visited, we found nothing to explain its history or its purpose. It was just a large empty space. The ceiling was beautiful, the stained glass wonderful, but it left me saddened that people who visited without much idea of what a cathedral is for would leave as ignorant as they were when they went in. We might have expected guides, information, even a shop selling religious tat. Our cathedrals have all those. But apart from officials making sure we were masked, we saw no-one to answer questions and nothing to suggest that questions might be asked. In true catholic style, there was a large crucifix over the altar. I was struck by the thought that this seemed like a temple to a dead god - there was nothing that suggested to me that the Christian faith was about living life in all its fullness - nothing to suggest a living hope in the midst of so much hopelessness. It was as if Jesus was still on that cross, nailed to a story that has become a tradition, and a tradition that must not be challenged and cannot be refreshed. It all seems so far away from the simplicity of Jesus and his message. I wonder what he would say?

Robin Blount

Seeking

Seeking and finding God isn't as straight forward as the Bible makes out - Matthew 7:7, 'Seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you, ask and it will be given to you.'

For some people with very low self esteem, damaged emotions, or who carry 'shame', all they experience when they seek God's presence is a barrier or a block. For myself it was, for years, a seemingly immovable mountain.

Life damages us all, to some degree, but if one has care givers who love, enjoy and delight in the child, bringing it a sense of belonging and worth, their self-esteem can remain quite intact. But for children who grow up with that damaged, it can be very difficult for them to have any sense of value, and for them to experience God's presence.

Thankfully, the God who created us in the first place is more than able to re-create us into something better. Like the sunshine melting a solid block of ice, it's done powerfully yet tenderly, and at a pace that suits us. For me the turning point was the practice of silent prayer. Just stubbornly sitting and waiting for God's promise (James 4:8) to come to fruition that 'if we draw near to God, God will draw near to us'.

Julia Garraway-jones

Shaped

I was born in South Wales where I attended Church as a choir boy. I grew up with the understanding that the church was 'shaped' like an isosceles triangle. The Pope or the Queen at the top, then came the Archbishops, the Bishops and Archdeacons, even further down the triangle came the vicars, and at the very bottom were the lay people and choir boys. I have many misgivings about this shape as a vehicle for bringing about the kingdom of God.

There is clearly a need for a change in the paradigm of the Church community. The isosceles triangle must go. It fails to reflect the teaching of Jesus.

So, what shape does reflect the teaching of Jesus? Dare I suggest that the new paradigm could be a Net? A network of relationships of people who are 'seeking God, however understood, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus.'

Luke gives us a window into the early Church in Acts 2: 42-47. It is believed that the first Christian communities were based on this pattern and the Gospel was spread through inter-related groups.

The Pandemic was of course a tragic worldwide event, but we discovered during that time how technology can be used. PCN is an idea come of age. If Paul had Zoom, how much time and money could he have saved on his missionary journeys!

Raymond Eveleigh

Sharing

My wife and I are founder members of the Newcastle PCN group which was started in the late noughties on the initiative of Pat Fuller, a member who had just moved into the North East. Since then the group has grown to a steady attendance of about 10-15 at its core, but with flexible edges of some that come and go as they please. We all value the opportunity to share our questions regarding the conventionally accepted beliefs and practises of the mainstream Christian denominations with which most of us are dissatisfied due to the lack of little progressive movement. We enjoy sharing our views on books we have read by progressive authors and attempting to re-express what 'faith' means for us all in these contemporary times. Our meetings always include the sharing of snack foods, which to me lends an informal element of 'Holy Communion' free from the presidency of a formally ordained cleric. With regard to the eight points, I wouldn't go to the stake for them. They seem to be in the nature of a creedal statement, which does not quite fit into the ethos of PCN!

Richard Firth

Reaching for the Unreachable

Consider the world map below, which is bigger: Africa or Greenland?



In fact, Africa is 14 times the area of Greenland. Severe distortion is inevitable when mapping from one dimension to a more basic one.

John Hick (former vice-president of the World Congress of Faiths) considers it thus:

“Concerning the different, and often conflicting, belief systems of the religions: our earth is a three-dimensional globe. But when you map it on a two-dimensional surface, such as a piece of paper, you have to distort it. You cannot get three dimensions into two without distortion. But if a map made in one projection is correct it does not follow that maps made in other projections are incorrect. If they are properly made they are all correct, and yet they all distort. Perhaps our different theologies, both within the same religion and between different religions, are human maps of the infinite divine reality made in different projections. These all necessarily distort, but perhaps all (in different settings) are equally useful in enabling us make our journey through life.”

However, when thinking about the Divine, we aren't just moving from three dimensions to two. We are thinking about dimensions far beyond our own. The reality behind the word 'God' is beyond religion, just as it is beyond science. On the scientific front, present day cosmologists talk about dark matter and dark energy, because of effects on our visible universe. But, just like concepts of the Divine, these too are beyond our current human comprehension.

For me, an experience at a Quaker Worship Meeting (which is mostly silent) gives a related perspective. About twenty chairs were arranged in a circle. But, it so happened that one, with a cushion on it, had already been occupied – by a cat. During our hour of reflection, this unexpected visitor spent much of its time purring, contentedly! I discovered later that during that hour, as had happened with me, most others had found their thoughts directed towards the implications of this. After all, for humans, we concurred with Paul writing, “The greatest of these is love.” pointing to, what lies in the heart being pivotal. The cat clearly resonated with whatever spirit it detected in that room.



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

However, its intellect was presumably oblivious to matters of science, religion, and the Divine, as well as questions related to where such things as life, love and loyalty come from. But, as referred to earlier, how much further along this intellectual track than the cat are we? I suspect that our brains are also still scratching the surface in understanding the big questions, let alone the answers.

In the silence, my mind wandered to the 13.7 billion years that it took us to come into existence. Also, that when our solar system, and all earthly life with it, eventually explodes to extinction, the universe is thought to be going to continue - not for billions, but for trillions of years! The time and physical immensity of this are mind-boggling. What are the implications? Did God really make this vast universe and dimensions unseen, just for the benefit of us?

From the religious standpoint, we use metaphor to reach for the unreachable. For instance, Psalm 18: *“The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer. ... He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”* God is not literally these things. These are all helpful metaphors in certain contexts. It is good to ponder them when reaching out with our minds. However, when we literalise metaphor, problems arise. In his booklet: 'Why Silence?', Brian Holley refers to a deeper encounter with silence as 'soul-silence'. He writes,

“It is better to leave the mystery as a mystery without definition, without labels. Clearly, George Fox (the Quaker founder) had been seeking something within a Christian context and, having found it, he interpreted it in a Christian context. However, we now have evidence that the experience is common to humans of every religion, as well as those who have none, so the context is not important. Whether you are a theist, non-theist, agnostic or atheist need not affect your experience of 'soul-silence'. However, if we want to label it, there is a danger that it may diminish our experience of it. By labelling it, we will only ever be able to think of it within the confines of our label, which is perhaps why, once belief in traditional Christianity began to wane among Quakers, the experience did too. The experience had been too closely associated with the label.”

As our minds persist with pondering the mystery and reaching out for the unreachable, may the cat (and we) continue to purr.

Life after Death

For me, January 2022 was a month of funerals. There were four of them, each different, each special. That is one of the great things about funerals – they are unique to the individual, and the most poignant and helpful ones are the most unique. The four funerals were all for men, aged from 58 to 88; some were Christians, some were not; some had Christian spouses, others did not; some of the funerals were with Christian celebrants and others had humanists. All of them did justice to the memory of the deceased and celebrated their lives, what they meant to family and friends, their achievements and their foibles, and generally gave them a fitting farewell.

But funerals are not just about the individual who died, nor yet are they solely about the family and friends who have lost their loved one; they are also times that bring us each face-to-face with that most difficult of questions - what happens next? I realised that for me there was an unfinished piece of theological reflection here: what exactly do I believe about the resurrection, about life after death?



David Rogerson is a Methodist Local Preacher and a member of the Forth Valley group.

What does the Bible has to say on this matter? We may not want to apply a literalistic or uncritical approach to scripture, but as Christians we do need to take seriously what is written in the Bible. That isn't easy: we probably think we know what the Bible says and listen out more naturally for those texts that confirm our thinking rather than those which challenge our preconceptions. So, we will need to do some careful research. I've made a start on this by Googling "biblical references to life after death" and then examining the top 100 passages that www.openbible.info claims people find most helpful. I have, somewhat subjectively, plotted these passages on our chart.

To do this, I have assigned each passage a high, medium or low score on both axes. Plotting all of the Bible passages in this way, while omitting duplicates or overlapping texts, provides a good overall record of the biblical witness. What we find is really quite interesting.

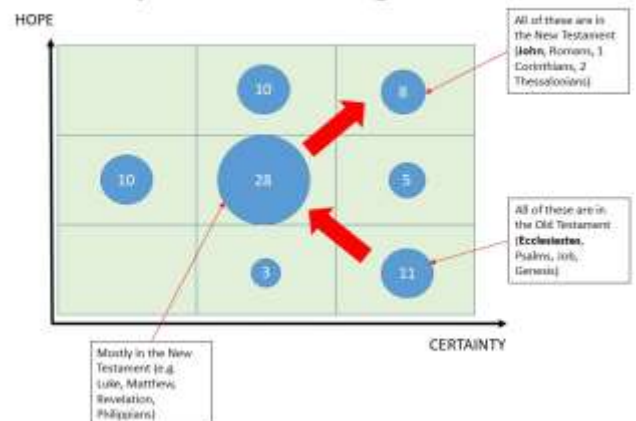
Few of the texts are on the left-hand side (i.e. are low on certainty) and none of them is in the bottom left box. I consider this to be quite re-assuring. If you have doubts (that is, little or no certainty about what happens after death) then you are almost by definition someone who has some hope. Doubt is not the opposite of hope or indeed the opposite of faith; it is merely the opposite of certainty.

Although there are texts in all the right-hand boxes (i.e. that display a high degree of certainty) the largest group of biblical texts lies in the middle – somewhat hopeful and somewhat confident, but with room for doubt in both dimensions.



Being a mathematician, let me start with a two-dimensional diagram: one axis of hope and one of certainty. Christian celebrants speaking of Christians who have died tend towards strong hope and deep certainty – so and so has gone to heaven to be with their maker. This puts them top-right corner. Humanist celebrants speaking of non-believers may have equal certainty, but they do not countenance anything beyond the end of this life and speak only of keeping a person alive through the memories and actions of those who knew them. This puts them in the Bottom Right corner. But it's not entirely black and white: most of us, I think, have some degree of hope in an afterlife, but we cannot claim to have a high degree of confidence, and we may consider ourselves somewhere to the left or in the middle.

Development through the Bible



Next, we should look at where in the Bible these texts arise. It may surprise you that there are at least 11 texts in the Bible that express certainty that there is no life after death. All of these texts are from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and represent the widespread view of Jewish people, at least up to the inter-testamental period, that after death there was the Pit, Sheol, the End. There was no real belief in an afterlife. Ecclesiastes is the book in which the largest number of these can be found.

In contrast, the texts that display strong hope and great certainty emerge only in the latest books to be written: the gospel of John (the last of the gospels to be written) and some of the later Epistles. In fact, all the top references come from John's gospel.

But for most of the New Testament, including the synoptic gospels and the early epistles, there is a profound and developing expression of hope in eternal life, but it is for the most part expressed with some caution either about what that means or to whom it might apply. Mark's is generally considered to be the earliest gospel and there is virtually nothing in it about an afterlife, Jesus makes no resurrection appearances, and the gospel ends ambiguously with Jesus said only to have gone on ahead of the disciples in Galilee. Similarly in Paul's early letters (Galatians, 1st Thessalonians) the emphasis is very much on how to live in light of the Jesus story, and it is really only in 1 Corinthians 15, written some 25-30 years after Jesus death, that Paul gives the first extended theological discourse on the resurrection, considering it a reality not just for Jesus but for his followers also.

At first glance this analysis may seem to support the classic evangelical doctrine of assured salvation for all Christian believers. There is a clear development of thought through the Bible that culminates in a position of both hope and certainty which many people find deeply convincing and life-affirming. So, for example, Jeremy, a university friend of mine who has terminal cancer and has been through 30 rounds of chemotherapy over recent years, during which time he has written three books that proclaim not a shadow of doubt about the life beyond death that he will soon experience. His mission is to bring such faith and confidence to others and in many ways and for many people he is an inspiration.

However, for me, it is precisely when a sermon or a liturgy or a hymn expresses a sure and certain hope of this kind that I feel uncomfortable, even alienated. If that is how I as a Christian feel, how much more must those who are non-believers feel it too?

I do not want to criticise or undermine the strong faith and hope of others: in the face of our common enemy, death, we each must find our solace where we can. If you have hope and certainty, far be it for me to try and undermine your faith. But our analysis of the key biblical texts shows that the top-right of our diagram is not the only place to be.

At least three key points may be made:

1. The biblical witness offers a variety of perspectives. It is my observation that top-right people tend also to be those who uphold the authority of all scripture as the inspired word of God. But you can't have it both ways: if the Bible is the inspired word of God, then all the text is inspired which means that those views on the afterlife expressed in Ecclesiastes are just as valid as those expressed in John. The biblical tent is large; God's mansion has many rooms; there is a welcoming space for all manner of people, including those who lack hope and have their doubts.
2. If the development of theological ideas is so important, why stop with the biblical writers? The only reason for giving priority to the top-right position of strong hope and certainty is that it is an end point of theological development. But that is only true if we impose an artificial cut-off at those texts that were included in the Bible by the Council of Nicaea in 325AD. In truth, theological reflection and development has been going on continuously throughout history, so perhaps we should pay more attention to the most recent research, including scientific and sociological research.
3. At heart, Christians are people of the way, followers of Jesus. So, while we engage with the academic, the secular and the political society in which we live, we always do so in dialogue with our own developing understanding of who Jesus was, what he said and did, what he stood for, and what he demands of his followers. When we examine what Jesus said about life after death (rather than what others such as John or Paul may subsequently have said based on their own theological reflections) we find precious little, and what he did say was mostly poetic, parabolic and ambiguous. It seems that life after death was far less of a priority for Jesus than the fullness and fairness of life before death. What was Jesus' view of his own death and resurrection? My reading of the various texts is that Jesus was clear that he was going to suffer and die; but his view on what would happen thereafter could perhaps best be described as hazy hopefulness. Jesus, along with much of the biblical witness, was slap bang in the middle of our chart. Of course, post-resurrection our perspective can be a bit different, but if that was good enough for him, it is good enough for me!



Local groups

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

Newcomers are always welcome.

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

We continue to meet via Zoom, on the first Tue at 7.30pm, and recently we have been exploring what might be the progressive Christian view of moral and ethical issues. We have looked at racism, sparked by a viewing of the recently released *Made of Stories* film, followed by abortion and euthanasia. For our Dec meeting we shall be exploring the basis of a progressive Christian approach to moral and ethical issues which is a question which is raised when we have explored particular topics. In Jan 2023 we are looking forward to getting together in person to mark the season with a shared meal. Please get in touch if you would like to join in any of our online gatherings. We have been pleased to meet some new friends who have become regulars via Zoom and we have enjoyed the opportunity to invite contributors from near and far.

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".

Normally our meetings continue to be on the first Wed each month at 1.30-3pm 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 Zooming helpful, especially for those living at a distance from Bolton, we send out a link each month to those who have indicated they wish to join us on Zoom.

Edgehill Val Trinder
01926 641564 v.m.trinder@btinternet.com

We are a relatively new group and are enjoying our discussions and getting to know each other. We meet on the last Thurs.

Last month we had a lively and wide-ranging discussion about "Life after Death". We covered a lot of topics and inevitably ran out of time! We talked about heaven and hell, ghosts and 'supernatural' experiences; different religions' beliefs about an afterlife and reincarnation; judgement, resurrection and what immortality means to us.

We touched on the importance of focussing on the significance of our lives now, rather than life after death or heaven as a reward. This leads us nicely on to our next topic for our Nov meeting when we are hoping to discuss the atonement.

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

Our new programme began in Sept with a fascinating discussion on the book by Hugh Rock, 'God Needs Salvation - A New Vision of God for the Twenty First Century'. Rock outlines the two incompatible visions of God developed and held over the centuries: in short, the community/tribal God of the Bible and the nature God of the philosophers. We could only agree that violence is done to our understanding by trying to roll these visions together, and instead warmed to the view that God is 'a vision directly rooted in the ideal potential of human relations'. Feminism was our next theme, ably presented as a journey from the sacrifices and achievements of the Suffragettes to the present day. Amongst all we heard and discussed was a striking Mary Stott quote on the focus of second wave feminism: 'It is the search for an identity as a human being, a deeply felt, often inarticulate, protest at being typecast by sex from birth to death'.

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth
radpilgrims@gmail.com

Unfortunately, our former regular meeting place is no longer available, and the group, which is gradually expanding, is becoming big for a members' house. We are continuing to look for a suitable venue. We did

hold a most enjoyable meeting in a members' garden during the summer. If anyone else in the south east of England would like to make contact, please get in touch.

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

In the first part of our hybrid Sept meeting Christine Whitworth introduced us to Peter Rollins' book "The Orthodox Heretic" - a different way of looking at the parables. Jan Sambrook then shared reflections on her experiences at Greenbelt. As I write we are looking forward to our Nov meeting, again hybrid, when we will discuss Don MacGregor's "Christianity Expanding: Into Universal Spirituality", the first book in his Wisdom series.

Woking Fred Pink
07889 200078 fred.pink@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are still using Zoom which works well as several of our participants are not local. We have had excellent meetings discussing Don MacGregor's book *Expanding Scriptures*, culminating with an enthralling Question / Response session with Don himself. We are currently planning our 2023 meetings and expect to cover a variety of topics including PCN webinars and possibly some of the mystics. We meet from 9.30-11am on the second Sat on Zoom and, after the winter maybe, a mix of zoom and face to face at Trinity Methodist Church, Brewery Road, Woking, GU21 4LH.



DEATH,
WHERE IS
YOUR
STING?

Dying and Death Examined

Robert Reiss

Greenbelt

It was my first time at Greenbelt and I wasn't quite sure what to expect. Certainly, I hadn't been prepared for the sense of community and the simple joy that I felt from others as I walked around the site. PCN Britain had a stall in the Takeaway area, a row of tents where charities can campaign and raise awareness. The stall was open for over 30 hours throughout the weekend and my thanks go to Adrian Alker, Peter Stribblehill, Dave Coaker, and our volunteers Tina, Chris, Matthew and Ada, for allowing me time to explore.



Over the weekend we had many wonderful conversations with passers-by some of whom we subsequently welcomed as members, and handed out hundreds of magazines. My thanks to those who contributed to the promotional edition; it was very well received. Several of our members who were at Greenbelt stopped to say hello and it was a pleasure to put faces to names. We also had several people who said that their friends were members so we know that you are spreading the news of PCN Britain in your communities; thank you for that.

We had many positive comments about our display but people also told us that they would have preferred a small item to take away and look at later. We have listened to this and are working on some smaller, simpler promotional material for future events.



At the end of the weekend, I was absolutely exhausted, slightly sunburnt, but also very happy with what we had achieved. I am already looking forward to Greenbelt 2023 and hope to see many of you there.

Sarah Guilfoyle
Administrator, PCN Britain

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Born Again

The Christian concept of being "Born Again" presumes a change of approach in support of current doctrine.

Yet, in the mouth of Jesus, it was a call to an alternative viewpoint. So, from the depths of ordained orthodoxy, we may be called, reborn, into a radical faith distanced from current religious dogma. We may be reborn as a new unconstrained creation. We may be called to re-imagine reality.

Yet such departure from all we have told and taught brings uncertainty along with new openness. The paralysis of fear dogs our footsteps. As we step over our past limitations, we rethink our past foundations, in search of new boundaries and security.

Out of that womb of confusion, we are reborn, emerging to new truths and conceptions, driven by new incentives or teaching, seeking for new foundations and ultimate reality.
Born again!

Edward Conder

Reviews

The Audacity of Peace by Scot McKnight, DLT



Scot is a peace advocate from the Reformed Theology heartlands of Illinois. His distinguished academic career has been spent, he describes, developing an overarching 'peace ethic'

which is core to his theological approach. Drawing on Michael Gorman's notion of 'Cruciformity', he develops a theology of the Cross that is necessarily pacifist, not only in relation to war but any form of violence within which he includes both the death penalty and abortion. Though from a very different provenance and understanding of Scripture, he reaches similar conclusions to Marcus Borg and others within the Jesus Seminar regarding Jesus' challenge to Caesar, namely that he is Lord and Caesar is not with the consequence that the Way of Christ is one of subversive non-violent resistance and peace-making.

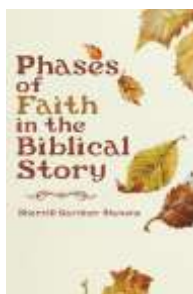
Unsurprisingly, he focusses particular attention on the Sermon on the Mount. He doesn't duck, however, the advocacy of violence in other Scriptural texts. He cites numerous OT passages which he deems 'morally reprehensible' and argues for an evolutionary understanding of the place of violence from God as Warrior to the absorption of human violence with the Crucified God. He develops a symbolic understanding of apocalyptic texts, including Revelation, comparing these with, amongst others, the novels of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, whilst making the very important point that these texts do not cause the same offence to those who are oppressed as to those who are not. Indeed, he compares the songs of Revelation with Black American Spirituals that hold out a hope for a better world in a context of struggle.

The book is framed in terms of the writers who have shaped his theological journey. Largely these are from an American Reformed context and not well-known to me, but two stand out: the Mennonite

Ron Sider whose book 'Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger' was hugely influential in the UK in the 70s and still stands the test of time; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose 'The Cost of Discipleship' is central to his thesis. The thought of Bonhoeffer as a pacifist is intriguing (though McKnight doesn't quite go that far) and I found this coherent and challenging. I shall aim to read more.

Nick Jones

Phases of Faith by Sherrill Gardner Stevens, Nurturing Faith



In this book, Stevens reviews the Biblical texts and attempts to use it to demonstrate, 'the development of religious faith and the practices that express it'.

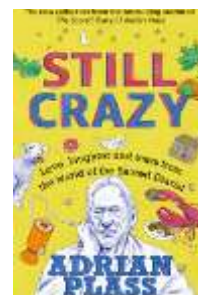
Beginning with the story of Abraham he intends to 'help readers understand what people through the ages have believed about God and religion, what their religious practices have meant to them, and how they have applied their faith to their lives'.

Sherrill Gardner Stevens is a retired pastor and Army Reserve Chaplain in the USA. He studied at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary gaining a Th.M. and a Ph.D. and having worked as an adjunct professor. He has written Sunday School literature and books on Biblical interpretation. I found this book helpful in explaining how ideas about God and religious practice developed through the Hebrew Scriptures from the perspectives of Israel's progression through tribal existence, to becoming a kingdom, and onto being in exile. However, I felt that the same scholarly rigour was not applied to the New Testament writings which seemed to be treated in proof text fashion. He explores the development of rituals within the early Christian church and suggests that these were more influenced by Paul's teaching than that of Jesus. Although tracing 'religious faith' development he stays firmly within Western Christianity; there is little acknowledgement of alternatives. Readers interested in understanding the different faces of God portrayed in the Bible may find this helpful. Progressives may find it limiting. Stevens describes himself as a 'devout "Jesus" theologian'; his disclaimer seems apologetic that he

reaches different conclusions than might be expected. Stevens was unpacking 'Phases of Faith in the Biblical story'; I was left wondering if this is more of a reflection on his own phase of faith and an invitation to join him on the journey.

Meryl White

Still Crazy by Adrian Plass, Hodder & Stoughton



Each chapter of the book is a sort of riff on the chapter title and consists of anecdotes, poems and sketches with a minimum of linking material. Sometimes the

material hits hard, such as a deliberately provocative rewriting of the beatitudes; at other times it can sparkle, though occasionally I found myself flagging a bit, especially in the chapter on the pandemic which seemed oddly disappointing. Various themes do crop up in most of the chapters and hold the book together. These include the excesses of a sort of evangelical pietism, the need to value our own individual Christian walk and experience, and tales from his beloved retreat centre, Scargill House. At the end of the book he rewrites 1 Corinthians 13 in such a way that God is represented as speaking a sort of Message Bible version of the passage, and there's a surprising epilogue in which the author writes a poem back to God. An enjoyable book, though probably one to dip in and out of.

Guy Whitehouse

The Women Are Up To Something by Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, OUP



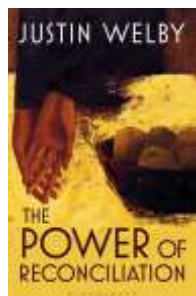
This is the important story of the development of contemporary moral philosophy. It takes us through the dramatic and important shift of the discipline from a traditional study

of ethics to a world where goodness, virtue and character become the lively and relevant issues at stake. It describes how it became acceptable, in this academic context and then more widely, to discuss what makes a good life and to identify areas like courage and justice and love as key. This could not have been further

away from the moribund and traditional syllabus. The place where this revolution happened was Oxford University and the time was during and after the Second World War. As the title suggests, there is another layer of significance to this already important and stimulating revolution. It was carried out by four women, at a time when women were barely and rarely leaders in academic fields, as in many other areas of life. The four women involved are names that resonate: Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgeley and Iris Murdoch. Against all the odds, individually and together, they developed a new set of thinking which challenged and eventually rebuilt and re-energized the somnambulant academic field and opened up vital areas of debate, inside and outside of academia. The impact is still very much alive today. The four turned their backs on the tradition of academic rivalry and forged a deep and abiding friendship. This book tells their fascinating and intertwined personal stories, describes well the contemporary context and chronicles the success of women in a determinedly male world. It is just lovely to read.

Christine King

The Power of Reconciliation by Justin Welby. Bloomsbury
For Welby reconciliation is the transformation of damaging conflict into healthy disagreement. His book



is well organized and its three parts in turn define reconciliation, provide case studies, and focus on the Lambeth 'Difference' course. It takes a global approach and offers

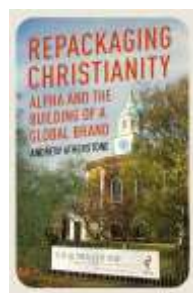
autobiography, course outlines and moving personal testimony on how he has enabled reconciliation. His work in apparently hopeless places shows how he made listening and forgiveness essential. He argues a theological basis: the Trinitarian God as ultimate reconciler, in and through the work of Christ and the power of the Spirit who calls all to reconciliation. Conflicts may not be resolved - but people may be reconciled. The approach to reconciliation is wide-ranging but his course descriptions and practical

instructions are not always clearly set out. He cites historic moments of reconciliation including Mandela and de Klerk; Rabin, Arafat and Clinton; Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley, but there is no examination of the process. There is also an unexpectedly positive account of Archbishop Carey's work in Nigeria which led to reconciliation. But this primary focus on organizations, and those engaged in processes of reconciliation, means less of the book is applicable to individuals. The approach pioneered at Coventry Cathedral is expanded. This involved research, fostering loving relationships, relieving need, taking risks, and the need to 'be present'. The 'Difference' course developed at Lambeth is also based on 'Presence', along with 'Curiosity', and 'Reimagining'. He describes being present to God and to others as signs of healthy relationships. He provides an example from an Anglican council meeting in Hong Kong where by listening and 'staying present' with each other destructive conflict was transformed.

Welby has risked his life for reconciliation, and it seems he successfully put this into practice at this year's Lambeth conference. Readers will be better equipped to understand conflict, embrace difference, and consider ways they might be peacemakers and reconcilers.

Peter Varney

Repackaging Christianity by Andrew Atherstone, Hodder



Alpha will be thirty years old in 2023. Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity, Brompton, and Grand Master and face of the movement, retired this summer. He takes with him the reputation for being 'the new Billy Graham for the modern age'. A new chapter begins this year. Meanwhile, in Anglican churches, its original home, and in churches across the denominations and across the world, Alpha courses are still being run. Alpha is active in every continent of the world and this year it is estimated that over a million people will attend a course in their local area. Clearly this is a success story and an apposite time to write something of its history. I need to confess that my

brief experience of an Alpha course brought me, in its enthusiastic and fundamentalist evangelism, as close as I have ever come to walking away from my faith. However, clearly Alpha works very well for many seekers, believers and churches. It was launched on an international platform - characterised, as it still is, by a shared meal and fellowship and by a slick on-screen presentation by Gumbel followed by group discussion, prayer and some conversions. It undoubtedly made clever use from the start of emerging technologies and provides a good role model to churches still unsure of just how to use Zoom, which proved valuable during lockdown. Andrew Atherstone offers us a history of Alpha. We hear of Gumbel's conversion and its spread from west London, in geography and style, to the undoubted international phenomenon that it is. The book is even-handed. Ultimately, however, this is a very detailed narrative with the assumption that it is a welcome phenomenon. I would have liked a more critical narrative.

Christine King

God, who on Earth are You? by Stephen McCarthy, Christian Alternative



This book turns out to be not quite as radical as its title suggests. The author does not start "from scratch" with this question but from his own varied religious

education and experience: his Roman Catholic background, work as a development economist in Africa, the Caribbean and other areas, and his early retirement. This led to a deeper interest in Ignatian spirituality and the working out of a Christian faith more in tune with the concerns of today and of the generation that is looking for meaning in life but disillusioned by the Church. He acknowledges that the book is a weaving together of these different threads in his life. The book suffers from a certain confusion as to its intended audience. Parts of it seem to be addressing people who are unfamiliar with Christianity or have been brought up with what McCarthy (and many of us) would see as inadequate perceptions of it. It offers information about Christian history

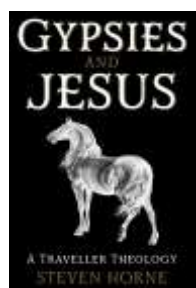
and doctrine, often at quite an elementary level, and practical advice about spiritual practices. In other parts, however, the author seems to be challenging Christians to rethink some of their ideas about church life, sacraments, ecumenism etc. People who are simply asking, "God, where on earth are you?" will find much of this discussion irrelevant to their needs, while readers within the churches may find themselves wading through long explanations about things they already know.

It is in the closing chapters that McCarthy comes to life as he finally expresses his own passion for economic justice and care for the planet. Different kinds of reader will find this book useful in different ways, but most readers will undoubtedly be inspired and challenged by the end of it.

Raymond Vincent

Gypsies and Jesus by Steven Horns, DLT

Gypsies have been victims for hundreds of years, subject to



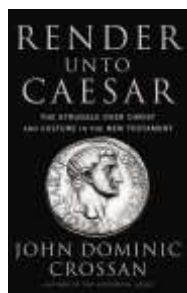
ignorance and negative perceptions, persecution and, under the Third Reich, systemised murder. Their separation from the societies in which they live is largely

self-protective. Little is known or understood outside of their own communities about the central role of the Christian teachings which form such a strong part of their culture. Horns is ideally placed to challenge the dominant narrative. He is the first person of Romany descent from the UK to gain a Ph.D. in Theology, and this detailed, academic and fascinating book is his analysis of the beliefs, practices and traditions of faith within Traveller communities. Studies in this area have been dominated by the voice of non-GRT (Gypsy, Romany and Traveller) writers. Some of these accounts are over-romanticised, others perpetuate old rumours and fears. This book is different. The author shares and illuminates the key elements of GRT faith and practice. His detailed and thoughtful narrative is supported by testimonies from the community which reinforce this understanding of religious belief and practice as living at the heart of the travelling

communities. We see the story of faith through Traveller eyes; we hear first-hand stories of Gypsy history, Biblical understanding and beliefs about Jesus and his teaching. His analysis is thought-provoking, not just about GRT theology and faith but about how this can illuminate an understanding of faith for the rest of society. This might include what it means to 'turn the other cheek' or what the nature of GRT 'moving on' and breaking camp means about the nature of life in all its impermanence, rooted, as he suggests, in the permanence of Christ. I found this a book well worth reading.

Christine King

Render Unto Caesar by John Dominic Crossan, Harper Collins



This book addresses the always important question of how Christian faith relates to its cultural context. Crossan points out how the Roman Empire in which Christianity was born is closely reflected in the "global village" of today, a world dominated by power, commerce, and the pressure to conform. Drawing on NT models, he identifies three early Christian approaches to culture: culture rejected and demonized, accepted and canonized, or confronted and criticized.

His model for the first is the Book of Revelation, which portrays the Roman Empire as thoroughly evil and prophesies its violent destruction. For the second approach he takes the Luke-Acts narrative, which consistently represents Rome as a fair-minded and tolerant regime within which Christianity poses no threat, shows Paul being sympathetically heard as he explains himself to powerful Roman officials, and climaxes with his living unmolested in Rome with freedom to receive visitors and propagate the gospel. In presenting the third way, he begins by showing, mainly through the writings of Josephus, that in the first century CE there was a succession of preachers with an eschatological vision who symbolically re-enacted God's great acts of deliverance in the past and advocated non-violent resistance to the point of martyrdom. He then traces evidence in the Gospels that

Jesus was within that tradition and sees this as the challenge to authentic Christian living. There are many things I would like to question in this book – especially what looks like a one-sided interpretation of Luke – but this is Crossan at his most fascinating, informative and provoking, and definitely a great read.

Raymond Vincent

Meeting Christianity Again for the First Time by Tony Rutherford, £5 plus £2 P&P tony.rutherford37@icloud.com

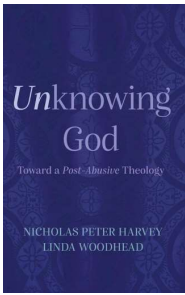


Tony Rutherford, an active member of PCN Britain since its inception, has produced a short and arrestingly written book that should well fulfil its purpose: to

provoke serious interest in the quest for a Christian faith that's intellectually and practically fit for today's scientifically-orientated world. In the course of some 50 pages, its title echoing (with his widow's approval) the late Marcus Borg's profound reappraisal of New Testament texts – Tony considers six themes: The Bible, Jesus, God, Church, Action and Contemplation, Being a Christian Today. It does not claim to be a detailed, meticulously documented academic study, yet it does reflect and embody wide and serious reading. It gets to the heart of each theme and offers perceptive insights as to how we may understand them in the 21st century whose 'thinking climate' is so vastly different from that of Christianity's formative centuries. A full biography is supplied for readers who wish to pursue the author's thinking further. Established 'progressives' may well find it provides a concise and helpful summary of their core beliefs. People seriously searching for an authentic faith that satisfies mind as well as heart – not least younger people entering higher education who may be bombarded by conservative Christian dogma. The book's cover is truly beautiful and subtly symbolic while what's inside is equally appealing.

Edward Hulme

Unknowing God by Harvey & Woodhead, Cascade Books
This is one of the best books I've read in a long time: immensely

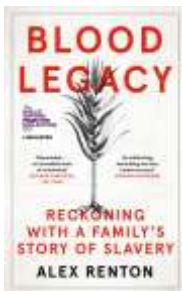


readable (it is a series of short, very loosely connected, self-contained essays) but full of depth and challenge. The two authors (Catholic and Anglican respectively) make

a series of arguments for moving away from a variety of orthodoxies in the light of experience. Read as a whole it may first be understood as something of a *cri de coeur* against totalising approaches to theology or morality. The chapters almost, but not exactly, alternate, and this gives the rather pleasing effect of hearing two rather different styles and perspectives on similar themes. I found that I preferred Woodhead's writing; perhaps this reflects my Protestantism, or perhaps it reflects my preferred academic style. (Although these are essays Harvey in particular tends to eschew fulsome references for throwaway mentions and makes the occasional sweeping claim). An unexpected bonus for me was to find that each was, quietly, espousing an open and relational approach to theology – albeit not explicitly. Harvey talks of 'flux' and Woodhead finishes with a reference to "a process whose outcome remains open." Thoroughly, wholeheartedly, recommended.

Simon Cross

Blood Legacy by Alex Renton, Canongate



This fascinating but deeply disturbing book contributes much to our understanding of this complex issue. The author, a well-known author and journalist, is descended on his

mother's side from the Fergussons of Kilkerran, a wealthy and distinguished Scottish family which owned plantations in the Caribbean. They meticulously kept papers which provide a rare insight into the setting up and ongoing management of plantations. In the first part we read about James Fergusson. After visiting several islands, James finally managed to acquire land in Tobago in an area known as Bloody Bay which was not a good investment. However, Charles was more successful when he acquired an

interest in a fully functional plantation called Rozelle in Jamaica. The price paid was high, and what is surprising is that 60% of this was accounted for in the value of the workforce i.e., the slaves! Through the two narratives, which cover the late C18th and early C19th, we learn about the plight of slaves, their high mortality rate, monetary value, which varied depending on gender and physique, and of the cruelty and sexual exploitation to which many were subjected. We are told how a slave could gain a position of responsibility and yet remain property. Each narrative concludes with the author's experiences when he visited Tobago and Jamaica and of his talks with those whose forebears were slaves. He shows that considerable wealth was generated by the plantations not just for the owners but for others who supplied goods and services. On abolition vast sums of money were paid to slave owners and, in an appendix, he shows what happened to some of the money paid and how some of their descendants are now active in supporting educational charities and other projects helping disadvantaged young people in London and Jamaica.

Nigel Bastin

Freeing Jesus by Diana Butler Bass, Harper One



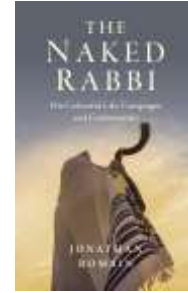
The name of Diana Butler Bass will be familiar to you and this is her eleventh book, subtitled "Rediscovering Jesus as friend, teacher, saviour, Lord, way and presence".

So, what does it mean to set Jesus free? Initially it's about what she calls the "battle for Jesus". Rewind to the 1990s when the Jesus Seminar was in the vanguard of discovering the historical Jesus while various opposing camps reasserted the miraculous God-Jesus, making sure that he stayed on a heavenly throne. In the end it comes down to "Jesus and me"; and in the light of this she recalls meeting many Jesuses during her six decades, and homes in upon those that particularly stand out. Each section is packed with stories and encounters from her faith journey which took her from a Methodist Sunday school to the Parliament of the World's Religions as a keynote speaker.

DBB ends the book with something she calls "memoir theology" which is the process of understanding the nature of God through the text of our own lives and taking seriously how we have encountered Jesus. "Jesus and me" again. The book is an engaging insight into the life and thinking of a leading progressive and is to be recommended.

Paul Harrington

The Naked Rabbi by Jonathan Romain, Christian Alternative



Romain is a well-known Reform rabbi, author, and broadcaster. Here he provides an insight into his life, campaigns, and controversies. He describes his early training and his forty

years with Maidenhead Synagogue. Although pointing to the particular features of Jewish religious life, he shares his considerable experience of dealing with the challenges of pastoral ministry - such as consoling couples who are having to cope with a miscarriage. In these situations, his advice is just to be with them. "A soft voice and kind eyes", he tells us, "is much better than any attempts at theological justification." He has his own "theory of the rabbinate" which he says is applicable to all, "to work to ensure your congregation feels you know them and love them." He has been at the forefront of four controversial national campaigns. First, in his work with mixed faith couples for which he was appointed an MBE. Second, with the potentially divisive effect of faith schools, becoming Chairman of the Accord Coalition, which promotes inclusive education. He considers it is important to build bridges between different elements in society not erect barriers. Thirdly, he has supported Dignity in Dying which advocates assisted dying of the terminally ill. He describes his journey from opposition to acceptance. Finally, he was a leading critic of Jeremy Corbyn whom he accused of antisemitism. This is an enjoyable and readable book. Romain's wisdom provides excellent guidance for all those in the early stages of ministry whatever their denomination, and his views on the complex issues for which he fought are thought-provoking.

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