

Progressive Voices



June 2023, PV45

Following Jesus

Following Jesus

is not about finding ourselves,
or even seeking the meaning of life.

It is about opening our eyes to the world around us,
to see the need of our neighbour,
to pick up on the unspoken cues
the longing behind the smile
the spark that is no longer there,
extinguished when hope took flight.

It is about recognising our kinship
with the man and his dog
begging on the city steps,
or the young woman
sitting in the shop doorway,
or the elderly veteran
whose once proud bearing
is now stooped and dejected.

Following Jesus

does not require us to travel far physically,
but to take huge steps
in our understanding
of our sisters and our brothers
who make this pilgrimage with us.

To bear their burdens
and lighten the load
with love and grace
lived out in mercy and compassion,
with steps more faltering than sure
and a hunger born of justice.

Is not this the fast that God chooses?

Liz Crumlish

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Progressive Voices is the magazine of
Progressive Christianity Network Britain
[Registered Charity No. 1102164]
We are part of an international network of
progressive Christian organisations.

Front Cover Image:

Gerd Altmann
<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/brain-waves-consciousness-4372153>
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Welcome

A bit more about God! This time our thoughts move onto God as consciousness with a bit of Quantum theology for good measure. We open up a discussion about the Church and Sex, with the concluding part to follow next time. Simon Cross interviews Sanjee Perera. We ponder our shared humanity, Resurrection and the importance of making eye contact.

I'd again wish to encourage future contributors to reflect on practical examples of living out a progressive approach to life and faith and look to our 8 points for inspiration - and we definitely need more material as my reserves of copy are dwindling. (Alongside articles, poetry, prose, images, etc. are also very welcome.)

Welcome to the 45th edition of PV.

Enjoy!

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Chair's Letter

Dear friends, I write to you having recently returned from a short visit to the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) – I was pleased to find that among the various streams of theology represented there, were a number of people, including speakers and presenters who represent some of the radical ideas and perspectives that have helped move the theological academy towards some sort of progressivism – open and relational theologies were being discussed, as were black, womanist, indigenous and queer theologies – all good stuff.

There remains a disconnect, however, at the intersection of academy and church: radical ideas may be welcomed in the halls of academia and may even make their way to the bookshelf, but they rarely seem to filter through to the pulpit or pews. We might reflect, I suppose, that there are many reasons for this – one of them is surely the ever-present fear that the Church as a whole (and particularly certain parts of it) is going to wither away – a desperation to keep people together seems to lead many to avoid talking about anything which might upset anyone. (The irony is that this approach itself is pretty upsetting for many of us.) But an underlying problem of a different sort is that there is just too little dialogue between the Church and the Academy, there's not enough sharing of perspective, or exchange of ideas.

I would like to think that PCN exists, in part, to help bridge that gap (between academy and Church) but if that's true then we would have to admit, I suppose, that we've still got an awful lot of work to do. In some senses the gap is no nearer to closing today than it was when we started two decades ago. The Church seems still firmly attached to language and ideas that many of us who consider ourselves 'progressive' wouldn't countenance.

There is some hope, though – as Leonard Cohen sang: "There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." When we look carefully, we can see cracks slowly spreading across the otherwise smooth façade: language concerning and attitudes towards gender and sexuality, for example, are changing (even if it feels like one step forward, two steps back at times) and there is a growing acceptance, I think, for a plurality of theological opinions. The issue of race is still a knotty problem, but genuine attempts are being made, I think, to begin to right past wrongs, and to change institutional attitudes. This progress is faster in some places than others, of course.

My interviewee in this issue is Canon Dr Sanjee Perera a psychologist who describes herself as a 'cognitive ecclesologist' – not a term I've encountered before. I like the way she uses new

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language to answer old questions. One of the things I set out to do in this series of interviews was to give voice to progressive people who aren't well represented in the pages of our magazine, Sanjee is one of those people. Progressive means many things, of course, and one might seek to make an argument that the sort of Anglo Catholicism that she represents is not terrifically progressive in and of itself, but whatever your opinion on that issue – her rational and informed voice on issues of race and inclusion is certainly one that challenges the Church as a whole. In this issue she offers her perspective on how God might be understood to operate as a 'confounding variable' later – another example of new language being used to answer an old question. Sanjee is an example of someone who is at the intersection of Church and Academy, and part of that work is introducing the Church as a whole to new ways of thinking and new ways of speaking.

If PCN is to help bridge the gap between Church and Academy, we must continue to challenge ourselves by engaging with people whose language we don't necessarily understand in the first place – we must continue to grapple with new ideas and learn new language that helps us to address old questions. There's a lot of work to do.

Perhaps you know of people who are using new ideas and new language, or maybes you're aware of places where new connections are being made – if that's the case, let us know. We're always keen to hear from you about the sensational books that you're reading, intriguing podcasts you're listening to, or amazing speakers you've come across. As a network we work best when we share resources and ideas between us – so please do write to me with anything that you think might be worth sharing, by doing that you might just be helping others too.

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Memoriam

Robert Reiss



I first met Bob in 2018 at his home in Camberwell. The walls of his library were covered in books and photos from his long career in the CofE. He served in many different posts, but perhaps his favourite was as Canon Treasurer and Sub-Dean of Westminster Abbey.

Bob was a warm and modest colleague and friend who had quite a stellar career in the CofE, serving as a member of General Synod for fifteen years. His interest in theology was fired by his reading of Bishop John Robinson's book, *Honest to God* - a passion which continued to motivate him for the rest of his career. Bob trained for holy orders at Westcott House, and after ordination and curacy he was Chaplain at Trinity College, where he served under Robinson, who by then was Dean. After Trinity, Bob served on the Advisory Council for The Church's Ministry, eventually becoming Senior Secretary. His PhD thesis, *The Testing of Vocation*, was published as a book in 2013. Bob felt that the Church neglected serious study of theology, and was outspoken in his advocacy a more open, inquiring faith. His book, *Sceptical Christianity, Exploring Credible Belief*, was published in 2016. In it, he wrote, "In the nearly fifty years since my ordination, I have changed my mind on all aspects of my Christian belief." In 2022, *Death, Where is Your Sting?*, was published, in which he examined the process of dying, and commented on what happens after death.

At his funeral at Salisbury Cathedral on 27 March Sir Oliver Letwin read the following passage from the book:

Of course, none of us knows exactly what we shall think when death approaches, but when that happens to me, I suspect thinking I would live on with personal

consciousness in some mysterious way afterwards would not help. Death is the end of life. In many ways I have had a good life, so have plenty of reasons to be thankful, although I realize that in the whole history of the world that is certainly not what many people who died in grimmer circumstances thought.

Bob died on the 26 Jan, aged 80. He is survived by his wife Dixie, and his daughter Anya. He will be missed!

Tim Yeager

Whilst chair, I had the great pleasure to welcome Bob into membership, and appreciated his erudition and modesty. He was very supportive of our conferences and was a great help at our London one on religion and atheism, the last we held before Covid. The books which he wrote in retirement contributed greatly to the debate over Christianity and its teachings in our contemporary society, and I was pleased to be able to offer a review of them. His sudden death came as a shock and we shall miss him greatly.

Adrian Alker

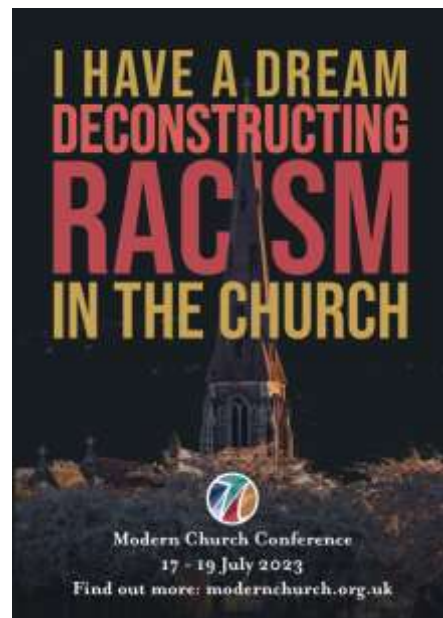
Tom McLeish



Adrian Alker and I met Tom in York shortly before covid. He was to be our main speaker and contributor to our Thinking Science, Thinking Faith event. We found him charming, flexible and approachable; just what we needed to 'kick off' the day. His early background was in 'soft matter' a part of Physics which interfaces with Biology and Chemistry in studying, amongst other things, the behaviour of liquids, colloids and flesh!

This polymath approach led him to be made the first Chair of Natural Theology at the University of York and he wrote several books about faith and science in 'order to change the culture among senior Christian leaders in their view of science - from fear to joy!' He will be missed as an Anglican Lay Reader as well as a scientist.

Martin Bassant



I have a Dream: Deconstructing Racism in the Church

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In February 2020 the Archbishop of Canterbury apologised for the racism experienced by black and minority ethnic people in the CofE since the arrival of the Windrush Generation. He also said that there is 'no doubt' that the Church of England is still 'deeply institutionally racist'. This Modern Church conference will explore the historical context of colonialism and its impact on our belief systems; contemporary challenges to power imbalances in theology and practice; representation of diversity in the structures of our life and faith; creative approaches to vocations, doing theology, and performing liturgy.

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Consciousness

In his article “Consciousness”, on page 11 of PV41, Gerald Drewett poses two questions:

- What created the laws of science, which enabled that force of unimaginable density to produce a new universe?
- Do the words God, religion, consciousness, and science represent concepts struggling to identify the same mystery?

Werner Karl Heisenberg (he of “uncertainty principle” fame) has stated “what we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning”. This seems perfectly reasonable. For example, when a human being uses an eye to sample light from a particular part of the environment, the lens of the eye projects an inverted image onto the back of the eye, where specialist, light-responsive cells (rods and cones) generate nerve impulses, that are transmitted to a particular area of the brain. While many wavelengths and intensities of light are received by the eye, the rods and cones (of which there are more than one type) will only respond to limited ranges and these are determined by the relative numbers and types of cells present. (Animals, such as dogs, have numbers and types of cells that differ from those possessed by humans.)

Thus the nature of the signals reaching our brains are determined by the nature of the biological equipment initially responding to the light from the environment. The brain then processes the nerve impulses to generate the perception of a view. It seems likely, that animals with different numbers / types of rods and cones will experience a different view. (For example, while most humans have three types of cones (there is evidence that some may have four) responsive to blue, green and red light, dogs only have two types, responsive to blue and yellow. In the act of observing the environment with our eyes, our biological equipment determines our method of questioning the nature of the light coming from the environment, and also determines the answer we get to our questioning. (A dog will get a different “answer” and experience.) While we might perceive a view “out there” the view actually resides in our brains, I would suggest.

While the precise definition of the term “science” can vary from dictionary to dictionary, common ground seems to reside in the necessary presence of “observation”, “experimentation”, and “systemisation”. I suggest that the latter term, “systemisation”, embraces the formulation and testing of scientific principles/laws, describing conclusions derived from data obtained during observation and experimentation (involving the biological equipment available to us, albeit in combination with other apparatus we have devised).



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

Taken in combination, Heisenberg’s statement and the commonly used definitions of science, imply the laws of science are highly influenced by our biology and activity. Further, scientific “laws” are usually framed using some sort of language involving code (e.g. letters, words and / or mathematical symbols) produced by human thought processes. Even the words “force”, “density” and “universe” are human constructs to which we give meaning.

In answer to the first question, therefore, I would argue that human thought processes created the laws of science. Perhaps it is wholly appropriate that we sometimes identify laws / principles by appending the names of the people involved in their derivation. Thus, for example, we talk about Newton’s laws of motion, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and Avogadro’s law.

It is also worth noting that it can never be guaranteed that future research will not successfully challenge them. For example, Newton’s laws of motion were found to be inadequate, when developing understandings of what happens at nanoscales (1-100 nanometres) and a new type of mechanics (quantum mechanics) was found to be necessary. While Dalton’s law, implying atoms can neither be created nor destroyed, does not seem applicable to our modern understandings of what happens in nuclear reactions fission / fusion. (Indeed, theory now suggests that atoms were “created” when the universe had cooled sufficiently for matter - antimatter asymmetry to occur, protons and neutrons to form and free-roving electrons to slow sufficiently to enable them to be captured by nuclei to make complete atoms of hydrogen, helium and lithium, these elements subsequently undergoing nuclear fusion in stars to create atoms of heavier elements.)

Turning now to the second question, I suspect the answer is more straightforward; for some the words do represent a struggle to identify mystery, while for others they do not. I imagine there are atheist scientists carrying out scientific research into human consciousness who would not link the term “God” with the “science” they are doing, and many may be trying to solve mysteries rather than perpetuate them. (In this respect, I would argue that once a mystery is understood it ceases to be a mystery but the likelihood of us ever being able to understand, completely, the system, of which we are only a part,

is extremely remote - can all the information defining the system, that contains us and much more besides, ever be contained within us? (Quarts and pint pots come to mind.)

Gerald concludes his article by implying that “God” is the word for “the mystery of why we have been created”. (He subsequently suggests use of the words “that of God” or “Holy Spirit” to apply to the “power” or “force field” (two very different things in physics) that underpins creation.)

In the article “The Cosmos”, by George Stuart, immediately following the article by Gerald, George implies that he is comfortable using the term “God” to refer to “the active creative “force” in this changing, expanding and evolving wonderful Cosmos”. To me, these seem to be significantly different ways of using the term “God”. I heard it said, at one meeting I attended, that “there are probably as many ideas about God as there are people in this room”. I have also heard the view expressed that God is a “personal thing”. These multiple expressions of “God” add weight to my perception that the word is being used to embrace an ever-increasing myriad of human ideas, not all of which are consistent or linked by common ground, the consequence of which use is to render the term vague in scope and obscure in meaning. It takes on characteristics similar to those of the word “thing”, requiring specific qualification to communicate anything meaningful. In my experience the term has frequently been used, unqualified, in church meetings and elsewhere, and I am often at a loss (in the light of the various uses of the term, of which I have become aware) to understand precisely what is intended to be communicated or shared, and wonder whether the many possible interpretations that could be assumed by those present would have anything in common.

I would suggest that the Christian community is held together by the stories of Jesus (albeit as understood in historical and metaphorical context) and the paradigm they provide for developing and promoting human love and compassion, not the many disparate ideas about “God”, which are as likely to exclude and divide as hold together (consider progressive interpretation versus fundamental literalism for example). In the stories, Jesus seems comfortable directing us towards a loving father (perhaps better understood as a loving “parent” in the modern age) and it seems that the Christian experience enables humans to sense such a presence within them, irrespective of an explanation (“scientific” or other) of how the experience is generated. Despite the many attempts to establish “God” as something beyond ourselves, it seems to me that “God”, like science, cannot escape from human methods of questioning, human methods of communicating and human thought processes.

Re-formulate

I am grateful in numerous ways for my religious heritage, but eager to re-formulate how following Jesus of Nazareth is stated and practised. I am referring in particular to the beginning, the middle and the end of what we are told about Jesus. It seems to me extraordinary that the ‘virginal conception’ of Jesus is celebrated as a fact. ‘The Virgin Mary had baby boy’ is a lovely song, but he is presented as biologically semi-human, semi-divine. Little wonder that much debate took place in the early days as to how this could be. The conundrum has persisted and been promoted with any thoughtfully penetrating questions discouraged. Catholic and Protestant, in their different ways, have perpetuated a real problem for us. I believe he had a father, whose pedigree is recited in Matthew 1. (The English translation of Isaiah 7.14 – ‘a virgin shall conceive’ from Greek could actually be ‘a young woman shall conceive’ from Hebrew.) Too little attention is given, I believe, to the narrative which says Jesus engaged in theology on a visit to Jerusalem age 12, but went to baptism by John having been a good boy in the meantime (and perhaps became apprenticed to his father and taking over the business.) It seems very reasonable and human, that he waited for quite a while before ‘going public’ with his sense of vocation. There is insufficient attention given to the fact that, like many other social reformers, he fell afoul of both the religious establishment and the occupying power, who colluded to despatch him. How many more ‘troublemakers’ have been ‘got rid of’ in one way or another. It goes on happening. The ‘resurrection’ of Jesus is a sequence of ‘appearances’ and, with all that we are still learning about grief and guilt, I find it helpful to write and speak about them as ‘experiences’. It seems understandable that ‘appearances’, which occurred often to begin with, reduced in number and Ascension and Pentecost mark both a dramatic and gradual transformation of experience types and a recovery of individuals and communities. Not least in the case of Saul of Tarsus, who presided over the stoning of another ‘troublemaker’, Stephen. On his way to carry out ‘more of the same’, he experienced traumatic guilt and changed sides – as can happen today. Did he hear the voice of Jesus? Like us, he had an inner ear, and could experience trauma and recovery. All this helps me to cope with the Christian story, but so many people do not cope, and the Church wonders why...

The churches go on peddling the ‘same old story’ in sermons, creeds and prayers and wonder why people don’t listen. 2000 years have elapsed. Jesus can be, and still is, perhaps, ‘the same, yesterday, today and for ever’. But not quite. Not exactly.

Paul King

God as Consciousness

No-one has seen God (John 1:18). The existence of God is primarily a matter of faith or of experience. By contrast the objective mind can no longer be readily convinced by reasoning alone. Atheists have a case though we may choose to dismiss it.

If God does exist, then by definition the 'Wholly Other' can be conceived only in images and symbols. Confined by notions of time, space and physicality our imaginings struggle. Symbols are unobjectionable, provided they are not mistaken for the underlying reality. Many conventional images do turn out to be idealised projections of ourselves, whereby God is believed to think as we might do.

The advance of knowledge has exposed the improbability of these perceptions. 'Demythologise' may have entered our vocabulary making a figure enthroned beyond the sky redundant, but belief in heaven when we die resolutely persists. The latest image to crumble is of God as Creator, science having established that the world's existence can be explained without resort to a divine originator. With cherished images under threat we trawl the Scriptures in search of firmer ground.

We don't have far to look. Moses was inspired to name of God as I AM, enigmatically adding that he would be what he would be (Exodus 3: 14). The door is opened to wide-ranging interpretations. Psalm 139 majestically accepts the challenge with its memorable vision of an all-pervasive God.

According to John's Gospel Jesus declares that God is spirit. Whoever wishes to worship must do so in spirit and (thus) in truth (John 4: 24).

Addressing the Athenians Paul expands on the theme of Psalm 139 proclaiming that in God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17: 28).

However, the image of spirit is not satisfactory. It implies an entity that comes and goes like the wind. It also hints at 'things that go bump in the night'. Consciousness is a more recent term embodying much the same meaning and coming closer to the Acts perception. As a welcome bonus it accords more closely with contemporary thought. The study of consciousness, though still in its infancy, is a subject of serious scientific investigation.

But what is the nature of this all-enveloping consciousness? We claim that God is love and I find this profoundly true. Love is not a single virtue but a spectrum embracing all that's good in life – peace, justice, goodwill, compassion, generosity and much more. God as the sustaining source of all this, calling people to acts of altruistic kindness. As I walk however imperfectly in awareness of this ever-immanent God, everyday encounters seem to acquire a new dimension, which frequently impresses me as greater than the sum of the parts.



David Stevenson is a restless Methodist. Worked in banking after a Modern Languages degree, self-employment and as his wife's carer.

The perception of God existing in consciousness answers some questions. Why no intervention to prevent natural disasters? Why an apparently capricious response to prayers? Maybe physical action is not to be expected of the supra-physical?

On the other hand, the image raises new questions inviting the reappraisal of established symbols. One such is the doctrine of the Trinity, adopted in the fourth century amid grievous internal strife. Just as the existence of a celestial father has been called into question, so too has the literal divinity of Jesus. As a devout Jew, Jesus would surely have been appalled by such designation, being quoted as flatly rejecting even the semblance of parity with God (Matthew 19: 17). Jesus may well have perceived himself as the new *mashiach* (messiah or anointed), but the title carried no implication for his essence, having been previously conferred upon the pagan king Cyrus the Great of Persia (Isaiah 45: 1).

As self-conscious beings we may readily relate, if we choose, to the omnipresent God existing in consciousness. In times of conscious engagement with the ultimate source of love we shall invariably draw inspiration and encouragement. If our prayer is for others, we shall be moved to convey that inspiration in person or through consciousness for we have that capability. When my beloved wife Elaine died in 2019, I was grateful to receive many condolences. Among the most memorable was a simple message from a cousin's daughter living overseas. She just said, "I shall send you positive energy". I found that uplifting.

Does the image of God as consciousness have implications for the resurrection of Jesus and for the hereafter in general? If heaven is to be where God is, then perhaps so. Increasingly it seems that the resurrection is regarded as a spiritual experience rather than a physical resuscitation. Certainly, Gospel accounts of Jesus passing through locked doors and disappearing at will suggest language being strained to describe an intangible conviction. And did Jesus die to appease an offended deity or to point to an intimate relationship with God?

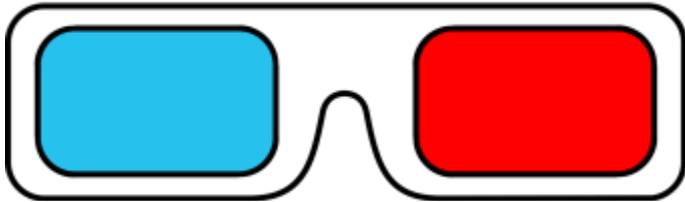
Friedrich Schiller (1759 – 1805) famously declared that between faith and history lay an ugly great ditch. Such a ditch can likewise be seen to lie between faith and reason.

Can the notion of God in consciousness offer a bridge?

True to God, True to Now

One way of making a three-dimensional image is to simulate how our eyes work. Two photos are taken of the same scene but from slightly different perspectives and each is edited in such a way that the viewer's left eye only sees the image from the left perspective and the right eye, the image from the right perspective. This can be achieved by giving each image a different colour tint and then the viewer wearing glasses that have each tint in the relevant lens - think of 3D glasses at the cinema. By carefully overlaying two, slightly different images, the viewer is able to perceive depth.

Something similar is the case with faith. The aim of faith is a depth of life, a depth of existence, that is simply not possible through any other means. And, just as with the creation of images, this 'three-dimensional' faith is the product of two different 'lenses', overlaid in a careful and considered way. The first 'lens' is what I shall call being 'True to God', the second, being 'True to Now'.



Just as it is easier to produce a two-dimensional image than a three-dimensional one, it is easier to achieve a faith that is 'two-dimensional' than one of real depth, the type of faith Jesus talks about. This is because it is easy to focus solely on being 'True to God' or 'True to Now', or as is probably more often the case, have an imbalanced faith, always leaning towards one at the expense of the other. In either case though, only a two-dimensional faith is produced. In contrast, achieving real depth is hitting the sweet spot between the two.

Those who are conservative in their faith, holding tightly to the past, to tradition, to particular interpretations of scripture (perhaps even to scripture itself), focus solely, or at least largely, on being True to God. They prioritise being True to God over being True to Now - over the particular demands and challenges of the present time and place. Context does not matter to them, or at least not much. The faith that results from this is anachronistic. To others it appears out-dated, disconnected with the here and now, an old wineskin, denying the incarnate, immanent nature of God. Such faith is incomplete, two-dimensional.

On the other hand, those who prioritise progress, context and all the particular demands and challenges of the present time and place, produce a faith that is focused largely on being True to Now. Their focus is on filtering 'the old ways' through the present and creating a faith 'fit for the twenty-first



Robin Drummond

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

century'. They see 'context as king' and God as ever-changing, ever-evolving, always adapting to fit the here and now. To others though, this is a slippery slope into anything goes, and denies God's unchanging nature. As with those who focus on being True to God, such faith is incomplete, it never takes off.

Each of these lenses, taken by itself, or taken as more important than the other, leads to a two-dimensional faith, which really amounts to no faith at all. Perhaps all that is achieved is religious belief (i.e. just another flavour of belief). In stark contrast, full, deep faith is achieved only by being both true to God and True to Now. We must find the narrow path that is the balance between these two, in order for our faith to have real substance, for it to take off, for us to be like Wittgenstein's man suspended from heaven, who appears just as one standing on the ground, but is subject to a very different interplay of forces and capable of doing previously undoable things.

Of course, in the case of the three-dimensional image, it only works because the two different images are of the same thing. Again, something similar is the case with being True to God and True to Now. Fundamentally, they are very, very close. This is glimpsed throughout scripture - 'Give us today our daily bread', 'Do not worry about tomorrow...' and of course, the great 'I am' declarations. Indeed, what is the resurrection itself, but a resounding declaration of something like the synonymy of God and Now - for we say 'Jesus is Risen'. Perhaps then, in this light, the world is characterised by a great fracture between God and Now and faith is the healing of this fracture, both individually and collectively, so that '...your will be done, here as it is in heaven'.

The great task therefore is, like the skilled maker of the three-dimensional image, to find the right balance between being True to God and True to Now. It is like walking a high, narrow ridge just wide enough for one's feet, with an equal and very real possibility of falling down either side - this way anachronism, that way relativism. The aim here has only been to sketch out the rough shape of this task in a way that, I hope, will be helpful. To earnestly begin such a task is a different story and one that, I'm sure, can only begin with the prayer, Veni Creator Spiritus. Come, Creator Spirit!

The Church and Sex #1

Self-inflicted wounds and wounding

A close reading of the text shows that the sexual ethics of the Hebrew Bible resemble fundamentalist Islamic sexual ethics more than what we might consider contemporary Christian sexual ethics. Underpinning those ethics were the ancient Near East cultural view that women were the sexual and domestic property of men and how essential it was that procreation be encouraged.

For the clan to survive, fertile women needed to produce more than 5 live births. Biblical rules protected men's 'honour' as sexual aggressors and owner of women. Gender roles were rigid; women's role was to provide children. Men were entitled to multiple wives (including the widows of their brothers through levirate marriage) to have concubines and had the right to have sex with any woman who was not owned by another man: prostitutes, war prisoners, widows, servants. A woman's consent was not a legal factor. [Note: this remained true for married women in the UK until 1991.] Women who were engaged or married were harshly punished for having sex with a man who was not their fiancé /husband. A man could divorce a wife; a wife had no reciprocal right.

In the harsh agricultural context of ancient Israel, the men owned the women and the fields, while the women were required to be wholly devoted to their one husband/fiancé on penalty of being stripped, abandoned, stoned or burned to death.

(Carr, David M. 2003. *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.)

The need for procreation was not the only shaper of Hebrew Bible sexual ethics. Property concerns and purity thinking also shaped them. A man had to know that the children born of his woman were his, to prevent claims of inheritance. Adultery was not about a betrayal of trust, but rather about the violation of the man's property right in his woman. The Hebrew purity system was concerned to define the nation of Israel, set apart from its neighbours, with its own rules of behaviour which they did not expect the neighbours to follow. Purity rules are derived from a culture's understanding of the essence, integrity and proper place of things. These were summed up for Hebrew society in ideas of cleanness and uncleanness and how to restore things to their essence/place. They are found in Leviticus' two Holiness Codes. Recall that the meaning of holy was 'set apart': the Codes were developed after Sinai as the people moved from slavery in Egypt and entered the Promised Land. The first code (ch 11-16) concerned integrity / uncleanness in **individuals** and prescribes rites of purification after, for instance, menstruation or seminal discharge. The second code (ch 17-26)

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concerned the integrity/cleanness of the **community** – with the remedies requiring removing the offender through execution or loss of name. This latter code is where we find the death penalty for adultery, for men who lie with other men as with a woman, for children who curse their parents, for those who commit certain types of incest.

In the purity code, femaleness is a contagion. When a woman gave birth to a girl, her purification period was twice as long as when she gave birth to a boy. At Mt Sinai before the giving of the law, 'the people' were told to consecrate themselves and not go near a woman. All foreign women were automatically suspected of introducing foreign cults, thereby violating the purity of Israel, so Deuteronomy requires the slaughter of women and children taken captive from nearby enemies, and it allows the 'sexual enjoyment' (i.e., rape) of those captured at a greater distance (Deut. 20:10-)

So, we've got procreation, property and purity concerns shaping the sexual ethics of the Hebrew Bible. We also have in the Hebrew Bible an affirmation of the goodness of the created order, (including sexuality), both male and female being made in the image of God, the commandment to procreate, horrible stories of the rape and abuse of women, and the threatened rape of men in Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Song of Songs, a piece of lyrical, erotic poetry about the love between a man and a woman. It's a mixed bag, but men are clearly privileged, and women constricted and vulnerable, without the human rights of bodily integrity of today.

Sex is not a primary concern in NT writings. By the first century of the Common Era, Jesus' time, polygamy had waned, perhaps in adaptation to the Greco-Roman value of monogamy. In that world the theory of marriage was changing.

In Mark 10: 1-16 and Matthew 19:1-12, asked if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus, citing Genesis, says no - *what God has joined together, let no one separate*. He then goes on to redefine adultery, saying that whoever (male or female) divorces their spouse and marries another commits adultery against their first partner. Through his prohibition on divorce and redefinition of adultery, Jesus altered marriage and family life in a highly significant way. He took the wife out of the realm of disposable property and made her equal to her

husband, undermining the ancient form of marriage. For the first time, marriage became an indissoluble unity in the flesh which recognised the equality of the sexes made in the image of God. The disciples were disturbed by this teaching. In Matthew, they say 'Well, if that's the case it's better not to marry.'

The four gospels have different ways of addressing purity; they can't be synthesised. However, there is one point on which they all agree: for Christians, physical purity is no longer the determinative element in their relationship with God. We see this again in Acts: recall Peter on Cornelius' rooftop, animals clean and unclean descending on a sheet and the voice of the Lord saying: *what God has made clean, you must not call profane*. Gentiles in particular were understood to be free of the purity system. Whether you were in or out of the community of the faithful was not about whether you followed the Holiness Codes. Rather one elected to join the community, and faith was about purity of the heart – to love God and neighbour as self.

You'll know that Paul on sexuality and gender, like the Hebrew Bible, is a mixed bag, even accounting for pseudo-Pauline writings. He acknowledges sexual desire as a fact of life that must be reckoned with intelligently and faithfully. He says celibacy is the preferred state, but if a person couldn't control their urges, they should marry.

Although the New Testament is not particularly concerned with sex, the tradition quickly became so. Why? What was going on in the first centuries of the ancient near east? The answer is far from clear and complex. Some factors include:

1. There was widespread revulsion toward the body in late antiquity, which affected the Christian movement. An anti-matter dualism paired with the privileging of males resulted with this equation: matter/body/women are evil; men are encouraged to rise above the material towards the spiritual.

2. The definition of appropriate sexual activity was vaginal intercourse, justified by procreation. This arose out of Stoic philosophical and Anti-Gnostic influences, and what would come to be called natural law thinking. The biology of the time believed that sperm contained tiny homunculi and the womb was an incubator for that little person.

Something else to keep in mind is that early Christianity was an intellectually lively tradition, organic and dynamic – developing over time in the interplay of argument and conversation. We can see the development of the Church's thinking about sex by reviewing what was written over the centuries.

We begin in the second century with Tertullian – *women are the devil's gateway*. In the third century Origen castrated himself for the kingdom of God, according to Eusebius [*if your eye offends you, remove it*]; In the early 4th century we find the Council of Elvira, the first anti-sexual canon law

requiring men in ministry to abstain from sex with their wives [inheritance of church property and role was becoming a problem]. Also in the 4th C Jerome said: *Blessed is the man who dashes his genitals against the stone*. And Augustine wrote about sexual desire – concupiscence – as a tendency to evil, requiring the right ordering of sexual activity for procreation only. In the 6th century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite offered a contrary view that would become more popular in the 12th century: he wrote of God as eros, the one who causes and is love. In the pews, however, between the 6th and 12th centuries, priests were using penitential manuals listing a shocking cornucopia of sexual sins and the prescribed punishments for them. The 12th century saw the First Lateran Council forbid priests, deacons, and subdeacons from marrying and from associating or living with concubines and women unless it was their mother, sister or aunt. Marriages were required to be dissolved and penance required. Some priests sold their wives into slavery. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas followed Augustinian thought but hinted that marital intercourse could be justified for the good of fidelity.

On the heels of Aquinas, the Middle Ages saw a subtle shift that sowed the seeds of change: the rise of courtly love challenged the procreation ethic and the theory of marriage. There was a general flowering in the West of the language of love, desire, longing, marriage and sometimes explicitly sexual vocabulary to describe the relationship with God and the experience of ecstatic union in the writings of certain mystics. Julian of Norwich and Margery Kemp in the 14th-15th century; Denis the Carthusian, Teresa of Avila. Meditations on the Song of Songs were often the vehicle for this: Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross and the Bequine Hadwich belong to this tradition. At the same time, arguments arose that sexual intercourse in marriage was good and godly for more than procreative purposes and justified for its own sake, intimating a link between spiritual love and sexual pleasure. In the 16th century, that pillar of the Reformation, John Calvin, affirmed that the greatest good of marriage and intercourse was the mutual society formed between husband and wife. The Protestant Reformation freed sexual expression from purely procreative intent.

Margaret Farley in her review of sex in the Christian tradition concludes that:

the fundamental struggle....has been to modulate an essentially negative approach to sexuality into a positive one, to move from the need to justify sexual intercourse even in marriage by reason of either procreation or the avoidance of fornication to an affirmation of its potential for expressing and effecting interpersonal love.

Farley, Margaret A. 1994. Sexual Ethics. In: Nelson, J. B. & Longfellow, S. P. (eds.) *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox.

Interview: Sanjee Perera

Simon Cross speaks to Sanjee Perera

Canon Dr. Sanjee Perera is an intriguing personality – a senior academic who is deeply, personally, invested in the church; a Sri Lankan who is passionate about the Church of England (CofE); a statistician who is concerned with morality; a number cruncher who finds spiritual hope in the confounding variable.

She is sometimes described as a 'cognitive



ecclesiologist' so when I spoke to her, to find out more about her work and perception of the church, I thought I ought to check – what does that mean?

"I often get described as a theologian, and although I have some undergraduate level qualifications in theology, I'm not a theologian. Of course, I read and write on theology, and I have worked in and with various theological departments, but the majority of my career has been in psychology. I'm a cognitive psychologist who studies religion.

However, for perhaps the last ten to fifteen years I have been researching ecclesial spaces. So, I would say I'm also an ecclesiologist, but I look at ecclesial spaces through the lens of cognitive psychology, looking at things like memory, identity, and learning, because ecclesial spaces shape the way we think, the way we emote, even the way we feel anger or grief. So I'm interested in the way an individual learns, and the factors that impact their behaviour and decision making, and especially the way that individuals behave within ecclesial frameworks and collectives.

I was born in Sri Lanka, and brought up in the church of Ceylon, which is an Anglican church, but my father was a Roman Catholic, so I have a hybrid heritage, but I would say my upbringing was Anglican. I have also served in the church of Pakistan, in Perth in Western Australia, and I spent some time in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa near the Afghan border in what was then called the North West Frontier Province. I'm now about to go to the US where I will spend some time with Virginia Theological Seminary in the Episcopal Church. So global Anglicanism, you might say, is also something I'm quite passionate about, but my expertise is the CofE, and I'm particularly interested in the way we organise and behave as a church.

One of the funny things about British Anglicanism is that almost everyone in the CofE, even the bishops, will tell you that they feel very much like an 'outsider', or they feel like they have no power. As a person of colour we feel this in a much more pronounced way. When I walk into a church, people often assume that I'm in the wrong place. Sometimes I'll walk into a church and a very helpful well-meaning usher might bustle over to say, 'the Indian service is in the church hall' or 'the Pentecostal church service is just down the road'. So, in that sense, I am sometimes treated very much like an outsider, but I would be lying if I say that I feel like an outsider. Anglicanism is my hearth and my home, I am well versed in its language and I understand its power structures, it would be disingenuous of me to pretend that as a Cathedral Canon now, and as the Archbishops' advisor in the last 2 years I didn't enjoy the Anglican Church's rarefied privileges that only a select few enjoy.

But despite all this, the reality is that when I walk into a church unannounced, nobody assumes I'm an Anglican. A lot of people struggle with this in the CofE, feeling both outside and inside at the same time. The CofE is an exclusive belonging, and the vanity and paradox of this is incredible, this Paroikia which found belonging amongst outsiders both in its formation and its reformation.

If you were to ask me whether racism was a bigger issue than misogyny in the CofE as a whole, I would say I don't know. But in grassroots spaces as you walk in through the lychgate, I think skin colour is a bigger issue, what you have to remember is that in the CofE there are a lot more women than men, so walking in as a woman is not as big of an issue as walking in as a black or brown person.

My research into how the CofE navigates race asked just this question. We explored whether racism was a particular problem in the CofE. We collected data from a variety of other denominational churches in the control sample so that we could compare effect sizes, and we also measured other types of marginalisation, like ablism, misogyny and homophobia. And of course, the results suggested that racism was a particular problem in the CofE.

So the question became what do we do about it? And this is where the ecclesiology comes in. We seem to think that we can take a top-down approach, but we have no such authority – the authority to issue a decree doesn't exist. Each diocese in the CofE is different, has different demographics, needs, assets, staff and resource capacities. To imagine a one size fits all set of strategies poured out from the top will filter down right to the end, and that it'll fix the problem, is naïve

at best and an industrious distraction at worst. The CofE does not work that way. That's a fundamental misunderstanding of how the church works: change cannot come from top-down strategy alone – change has to come from the grassroots.

Of course, this doesn't mean that there are things top-down strategy cannot achieve. For example look at the intentional appointments in the college of bishops and House of Bishops' participant observers, which was one of the recommendations from the taskforce we operationalised in our time. So when I started my research on the subject we had maybe three or four black bishops and that has doubled and doubled again. That makes a difference because psychologically it shapes the way people think about the church. I know of instances when someone has gone to their parish priest and said, 'I feel like I have a calling in the church, I believe God is calling me to be a priest' and the priest has said something like "I think you'd be great, but there aren't many churches that you would fit into, there are there aren't many black churches in the CofE, why don't you consider a Black majority church or the Pentecostal church?"

But for many minority ethnic people – being an Anglican really matters, it's where we belong. Anglicanism is a mediating tradition. It mediates between a received Christian tradition and the formation of a people of faith. This has meant that across the Anglican Communion many traditionalist Anglicans like me cleave to this identity, because it has the capacity mould a community together. It has the capacity to evolve according to the needs of the context and culture. The distinctive content of the tradition that is passed on depends upon the questions, crises and challenges that confront the community of faith. Post-colonial Anglicanism in the Anglican communion is distinctive because it allowed those who were no longer British but Christian, often in contexts where it was not the majority religion, to redefine it's boundaries and character. This meant that some parts of the communion flourished and bore fruits in ways beyond the understanding of the CofE. And while the CofE is dying, the Anglican Communion is growing.

Many in the Anglican Communion value Anglican traditions, traditions that supersede national boundaries, cultures and contexts because they are in harmony with a particular pre-cognitive human need. To put it more personally, I suppose I am a terrible traditionalist. And I am traditional because I see reason and logic to our rituals and liturgies, the way we do the certain things. There is a rhythm to our ecclesiology and our liturgy. Whether in Perth or Peshawar, whether in Liverpool or Lausanne you find that there is an intuitive similarity to the rhythms of the parish and the worship. Liturgy really matters to me. Liturgy is more than the printed words on a

service sheet; anything that mediates the nature of God and the good news is liturgy - the way we organise our pews, the stained glass, the font, even the graveyard, all this is liturgy. Liturgy is not just the little common worship book that you follow, it's much broader than that.

As a cognitive psychologist, I can tell you too that the fabric of a church, the music and ambience leaves a much stronger impression. You are much more likely to remember a song you sang than a song you listened to, the things you did actively and reactively than the things you saw done, the strong emotions of joy or grief, of presence or absence or even stillness, than the things you watched indifferently. If I said to you: 'do you remember, on the 13th of November, you went to that St Peter's, Harbourne?' What you remember about it is probably not what was said from the pulpit, you're much more likely to remember the physicality of the church, and it's not even just about memory, it's about how it shapes your thinking. You might say, 'Oh, I felt engulfed in the sense of light because of the way that the sun shone through the stained glass.' Human beings relate to the world aesthetically, we relate to things like textures and sounds. That is why hymnody is very powerful.

The truth is, the CofE is dying, people's connection with this tradition is dying out. Our episcopal leadership can see that we will soon be extinct, Our research and mission and ministry divisions have carefully analysed the parish return numbers, and we are all terrified of this seeming certainty. Being a statistician, I'm always running numbers, the last batch of stats told us that the average age of our congregations is shooting up. And I believe that this is because we have mistaken the iridescent DNA of Anglicanism's tradition to survive and evolve with something else. Our survival and reformed catholicity does not come from the petty self-preservation. The CofE for many centuries burned in the fire of reformation, the passions and hunger for our lives to be lived or lost for our faith alone has fuelled our survival. The CofE in those early days was incredibly pragmatic, but its missiology, often mired in colonialism and racism, kept its embers bright. It was contextually relevant embodied in rural parishes or growing industrial towns. But somewhere along the way we lost this embodied nature of parish life, where the parish church was the beating heart of the community, to a kind of bourgeoisie provincialism, fragmenting common heritage into regional or ideological blocs, that didn't embrace the fresh influx of the other to keep in touch with the deep truths of Anglicanism that craves the Spirit to renew us continuously. We started to leave the outsiders, the non-belongers behind, forgetting we were first and foremost called because we were called out from worldly belongings.

So when we do inclusion and racial justice work, we have to do it in a way that doesn't leave anyone behind. We have to do it in a way that doesn't set up a binary, and yet, the answer is not to say 'we're all racist, we'll just have to be okay with that', no we have to keep fighting it.

It's hard to do that, of course, because fear is the great manipulator of tradition. And we have been driven by fear for so long, that everything becomes a battle. When we talk about dwindling churches, the clergy of those dwindling churches feel like they're being personally accused. When we see ONS statistics that tell us that Christianity is dwindling, while other mainstream faiths are growing, instead of looking at why we are dwindling we are threatened by the growth in others. I believe, it's really important to do the work in such a way that, that understands this fear. This is where I think that the cognitive psychologist in me steps to the fore-front, attempting to understand the fear, to understand vulnerability – to understand the brokenness of the church. We must actively work on Faith, Hope and Love. Hope is not naïve optimism but a trust that the Spirit moves amongst us making the impossible possible.

So I would say, if you ask me whether I was optimistic about our church flourishing again, about racial justice being achieved in the CofE, I would say, being a statistician driven by data, I'm not optimistic, the stats look bad, we're dying out and systemic racism is a wicked problem that is too complex to resolve. I think in numbers, I think in patterns, correlations, variances and relational constructs formed in big data, so I'm always assessing risk and projecting what is possible. And this may seem strange, but I also think of the Holy Spirit in terms of numbers, it's that random variable, what we call an extraneous or a confounding variable, that changes the outcome in a way that seems impossible or incredible. So if you said to me, the change we have managed in the last two years in the CofE, if you said to me, did you think that was possible a decade ago? If you ask me that five years ago, I would have staked my life on it being impossible. And the change that has taken place, I can't pretend it has anything to do with me. It is because some random American black man died under the foot of another White man. He wasn't a politician or a footballer or pop star, he wasn't some great moral, wonderful philanthropist. And yet, whatever you think of Black

Lives Matter or the politics around it, it was a sweeping change, and it touched the CofE. It touched us so much that the archbishops and bishops took a knee. This is behavioural change. That didn't come from strategy. This change didn't come from my work – I like things to be carefully categorised, strategised and controlled. I like to know every extraneous variable and I couldn't have imagined this happening. I mean, can you think of two things more removed from each other as George Floyd and the CofE?

So that's where my hope is, that sort of butterfly effect. For me, behaviour can be quantified and predicted to some extent, but the thing that eludes us always is that confounding variable, and I always think of the Holy Spirit as a confounding variable. So, yes, I have hope. The Holy Spirit, the confounding variable is what I count on. From my own perspective one of the mistakes we make is that we put too much faith in what seems to be powerful and strong. Too often in the Church we value gravitas, the strong cold-iron unforgiving grip of leadership that has the stomach to make ruthless decisions. We have forgotten that we as the church must be driven by love. Cutthroat strategy and duplicity seem to be how we believe we might achieve results. Strong arming the weak and the oppressed to protect reputations, to appear strong in this terrifying reality we inhabit, is where the Church has ended up. Whereas actually, it's the fragile and the apparently inconsequential that is so often the powerful element, and that seems to me to be deeply written into the Christian story. This may seem a gloomy outlook, but I trust in the Spirit who intervenes in between every breath and moment, resuscitates the Bride of Christ despite our best efforts to condemn her to the ashes. So yes I have hope.



Our Shared Humanity

Some Inclusive Spiritual Perspectives

I would rather have questions that can't be answered, than answers that can't be questioned.

Richard Feynman

Basic questions

Young children sometimes ask very perceptive questions. One of our daughters, Wendy when aged seven, questioned my wife, Maria:

"Mummy, if you'd married someone other than daddy, would I be me?" What had made Wendy who she was? She had had no control over her inherited DNA, also how she was being brought up. But she was increasingly making her own choices, which also played a big part in making her - her.

Taking this further, what has made me – me? To what extent, for all of us, have our upbringings and choices affected our impact on wider society. Along the way, we've accumulated all sorts of biases, some conscious, but mostly unconscious. Have these led to developing a sense that our group and lifestyle are normal, and the world would be a better place if others believed, lived and did things as we do? Or have our hearts grown more towards valuing diversity - and our shared humanity?

A Changing perspective

We live in an increasingly interconnected world. As many people travel to, and live in lands which are way beyond their places of birth, our cultures intermix. The internet also enables us to reach into and absorb the life experiences of people in distant lands, often instantly. This gives us a much-enhanced perspective on the diversity of ways in which our world views and spiritual beliefs have developed. Where is this mushrooming cross-pollination leading us?



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There generally seems to be a resonance with aspects of spirituality such as compassion, integrity and transformed hearts, whatever differences people may have regarding beliefs about the source of these. On a religious front, this is one aspect that has been evident in Interfaith developments. Various PCN friends engage with this in different ways. Might a significant next step be to probe more deeply into experiences common to all people, irrespective of their beliefs, religious or otherwise?

This is by way of an introduction to a new eBooklet, I've written titled, 'Our Shared Humanity: Some inclusive spiritual perspectives' which explores this theme. It is divided up into a number of sections where the reader can immediately focus on aspects which may be of particular interest. The first piece recounts my own initial path which led to atheism.



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Further sections branch into wider experiences and overviews. Each section is one page.

A couple of years ago, my friend Letlapa Mphahlele, former South African liberation army commander during apartheid times, wrote a reflection in 'Progressive Voices', which concluded:

Beyond prejudices we inherited from our forebears, across the fences and walls we erect around ourselves, across doctrines and dogmas we uphold, perhaps it helps to acknowledge that there's a thread that runs through all the ideologies and all the schools of thought: common humanity. And if we recognise humanity in others, no matter how different from us they look and dress and talk and worship, we'll be nourishing and watering the roots of our own humanity. Is this a vision that can unite atheists like myself with a variety of religious believers where we come together for a greater 'Yes' - the reality of a shared humanity?

This is quoted on page two of the booklet, it sets the scene for what follows:

<https://sites.google.com/view/oursharedhumanity/home>



Corporate Prayer in the 21st Century

When we share together in worship, we include times of corporate prayer which are usually led by an individual. One of these goes by the description “prayers of intercession” or in my case “prayers of concern and commitment” indicating that we have a role to play in the answering of that prayer. On more than one occasion I have heard someone admit that they struggle to engage with what can be a lengthy prayer, often towards the end of the service. The form of this prayer varies depending on the theology of the congregation or minister, and the technical resources available. Some churches have explored creativity within this prayer by using music and image, I have sometimes included an activity such as the placing of hearts on areas of the world which we feel need love, but often it is a written/spoken prayer which reflects our reliance on the word.

In 2012 I began studying Quantum Theology which has resulted in a lot of thought around the nature of prayer and its use in church. Over the course of the 20th Century scientists have discovered things which change the way we see the world and our own humanity. Atoms which were once depicted as a sort of mini solar system are now understood as fields of energy, energy which changes in response to observation, and which can exist in more than one place at the same time. We have discovered that everything is connected and cannot be disconnected, and that far from there being empty spaces between ‘things’ they exist within a web of connectivity. Quantum Theology explores how we understand our humanity, God and our relationship with God, within this new framework for Creation.

Film, television and books have explored some of these ideas and in particular the idea that a group of people all thinking of the same thing at the same time possesses a power previously unknown. One example of this is in a Doctor Who story where the Doctor had been trapped by the Master and become a weakened form of himself. His assistant travels the world during that time telling his story and asking for people to all think of the Doctor at a specific time on a specific day. The result is a wave of power which restores the Doctor to his full self. During the war between Lebanon and Israel that began in 1982 researchers trained a group of people to “feel” peace in their bodies while believing that it was already present within them rather than simply thinking about it in their minds or praying “for” it to occur. For this particular experiment, those involved used a form of meditation to achieve that feeling. At appointed times on specific days of the month, these people were positioned throughout the war-torn areas of the Middle East. During the window of time when they were feeling peace, terrorist activities ceased, the rate of crimes against



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people went down, the number of emergency-room visits declined, and the incidence of traffic accidents dropped. When the participants' feelings changed, the statistics were reversed. This study confirmed the earlier findings: when a small percentage of the population achieved peace within themselves, it was reflected in the world around them. The effect was noted in what is now Zimbabwe, during the troubles in 1978 forty people were despatched to Salisbury, the then capital, with instructions to intensively meditate each day. The average number of daily deaths dropped from 26 to 4, rural life returned to normal and schools reopened.

The idea of a group of people all “praying” the same thing at the same time has obvious links with the church perception of corporate prayer and so I began to explore this with congregations. The prayers took the form of a conversation, which I explained was part of the prayer. I asked for up to five suggestions of things which the congregation wanted to pray for that morning, explaining that we would explore any broad headings to define an action we thought important in that particular situation. If someone suggested “peace” as a topic of prayer, we identified a specific location and what we thought peace would look like in that place.

Then we explored what needed to change for this to be the reality and the role we had to play in achieving that outcome. I would then summarise what we were going to think about. We went through this process for the four or five suggested topics and then we sat in silence together and each prayed through the summaries, at the end of which I simply concluded our time of prayer. People were stunned at how they felt, a feeling of power, a feeling of unity and oneness.

What seems to be important is that we have a conversation before we pray. We decide on the focus for prayer and we understand our role in answering other people's prayers, rather than creating a shopping list for God. If you have the technical resources it would be possible for someone to create a slide with the agreed words for the prayer so everyone can focus. With an internet link it would even be possible to use a visual focus by inserting an appropriate picture. Images often provoke more feeling than words alone, particularly for the third of the population who are visual learners.

In 1944, Max Planck, the man many consider to be the father of quantum theory, shocked the world by saying that there is a "matrix" of energy that provides the blueprint for our physical world. In this place of pure energy, everything begins, from the birth of stars and DNA to our deepest relationships, peace between nations, and personal healing. The experimental proof that Planck's matrix is real now provides the missing link that bridges our spiritual experiences of belief, imagination, and prayer with the miracles that we see in the world around us. By the early 2000s research revealed the following:

- The universe, our world, and our bodies are made of a shared field of energy that was scientifically recognized in the 20th century and is now identified by names that include the field, the quantum hologram, the mind of God, nature's mind, and the Divine Matrix.
- In this Field "things" that have been connected physically act as if they are still linked, even though no longer in the same location, through a phenomenon known as entanglement.
- Human DNA directly influences what happens in the Field in a way that appears to defy the laws of time and space.
- Human belief (and the feelings and emotions surrounding it) directly changes the DNA which affects what occurs in the Field.
- When we shift our beliefs about our bodies and our world, the Field translates that change into the reality of our lives.

I have continued to study quantum theology and the nature and power of prayer. There is a 'formula' which reads imagination + desire = reality which is demonstrated for example in the practice of Karate where the participant imagines their hand on the other side of the obstacle and desires it, rather than imagining their hand travelling through the obstacle which would be painful. This formula can also be understood as thought + emotion creates feeling which changes reality. When people pray 'feeling' peace they create peace around them. When we pray imagining something and believing it has already happened we create the reality of its existence. In the late noughties we were travelling to the Netherlands by car. As we travelled along a diversion route the car engine began to sound strange and lost some power. It was a classic occasion where I would start praying, petitioning God for assistance, but I had recently read that the only prayer God needed was one of thanksgiving and without knowing it I prayed a quantum prayer thanking God that we would get where we needed to be. I found myself letting go of anxiety and believing in the prayer, I did not need to do anything else. I relaxed. We spent ten days travelling, nothing changed with the car but we arrived home safely and the car was duly repaired.

All this has obvious implications for our corporate prayer. The desire or hope for a thought to come alive, without the emotion to give it that life, is a *wish*, it's simply the image of what is possible. In the absence of the emotion needed to bring it into the world of reality, a wish is open-ended. It can last for seconds, years, or an entire lifetime as the vision of what could be, suspended in time. Simply hoping, wishing, or saying that a healing is successful may have little effect upon the actual situation. This is important in our understanding of prayer.

Prayer needs to be more than wishful and it can be. When we believe in our prayer, when we feel the reality of that prayer coupling what we think is true with what we feel is true, then prayer changes reality. I believe this is the sort of prayer that Jesus talked about. A successful affirmation, or prayer of healing, would be based in feeling the completed outcome. Through gratitude we create the changes in life that mirrors our feeling. We have to feel as if the outcome has already happened.

I suspect that we have long misunderstood prayer as a tool for change, and especially our role in creating change. The knowledge revealed by quantum science is a challenge to the world and a very real challenge to the way we understand God, our humanity and our relationship with each other and God. We are called as followers of Jesus to embrace the world in love and we will do this through our actions but we will change the world through our prayers, in partnership with that which we call God, the source of all being, the field of energy which is the bond between all of Creation.

Discussion questions:

1. Think about the style of prayer in your church. How would a prayer around thanksgiving change the expression of prayer i.e. Thanking God for what is already done / is already being done?
2. In what ways could you introduce more creativity into your church's prayer life? How might prayers become equally visual or active?
3. How do you feel about the idea that prayer is about our corporate power to change reality?
4. Would your church be open to a conversation and agreed focus to praying together?

Books for further exploration:

- Quantum Theology:** Spiritual Implications of the New Physics (2004), Diarmuid O'Murchu
- The God Shift:** our changing perception of the ultimate mystery (2004), Adrian B Smith
- God, Energy and the Field** (2008), Adrian B Smith
- The Divine Matrix:** bridging time, space, miracles and belief (2007), Gregg Braden
- The Spontaneous Healing of Belief:** shattering the paradigm of false limits (2008), Gregg Braden
- What we talk about when we talk about God** (2013), Rob Bell
- The Field** (2003), Lynne McTaggart
- The Bond:** connecting through the space between us (2011), Lynne McTaggart

Resurrection

Jesus was crucified about 30 CE. Paul wrote his letters from 20 years later, and had no written documents to refer to. He had never met Jesus, but he claimed to have experienced Jesus in some way and was aware of the risen Jesus' appearances to the disciples. Paul is convinced that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and refers to him as the Christ. Paul says, 'Christ died for our sins', 'he was buried' and 'he was raised to life on the third day'. So, Paul seems unaware of an empty tomb, nor is Jesus' physical body brought back to life for earthly appearances; as with Ezekiel, God takes Jesus up to heaven – the elevation of the spiritual body. Mark's gospel, 68–73 CE, about forty years after, was written when Jesus' imminent return had failed to happen. Here the Easter story had been elaborated to include an empty tomb, an angelic messenger who says 'he is risen', and an instruction to return to Galilee and meet the risen Christ there. By the time Matthew writes in the 80s, legends about Jesus' crucifixion abound. Guards are placed on the tomb, and it is sealed, the angel says Jesus has been raised from the dead so go to Galilee and meet him there. Then surprisingly the risen Jesus appears to the women and repeats the instruction that the disciples are to go to Galilee. Luke, writing in the 90s, 60 years after, sets everything in Jerusalem and adds more stories.

All these elaborations are mythological statements designed to show that Jesus is a human being with a spiritual connection (God is spirit, John 4:24). To find historical facts one needs to interrogate Paul's letters and for which the earliest extant texts date from about 200 CE. Firstly, he 'died for our sins'. Sins derived from Adam eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and following Augustine we are therefore all born evil and are redeemed by Jesus' sacrifice. That may satisfy fourth century theologians, but it won't do today. We are born influenced only by our own immediate heredity, with the potential to become perfect (whole) or the opposite. The historical fact is that Jesus died. 'He was buried'. This is a euphemism for the fact that that crucified criminals were thrown into the common pit and left to decay. 'God exalted him at his right hand' (Acts 5:31). This is religious language that acknowledges that Jesus' life reflects the perfection or wholeness that God is hoping for in human beings and Jesus' achievement is acknowledged by him becoming a co-creator (at the right hand) in God's Creation. Jesus' example will be influential in the continuing evolution of Creation. He will appear spiritually as he did to Paul and strengthen those who seek to follow in his footsteps and become co-creators in God's Creation. On the death of the physical body spiritual life continues.

Gerald Drewett

Eye-contact

Sometimes, I glance in a mirror to decide whether I need to comb my hair or need a haircut. My relationship with the 'Man in the Mirror' is often remote, just checking whether I am OK. It's the broccoli moment in the toilet, when we check for green bits between our teeth. Whoever we are, we are refining the persona we project, whether it's a return to reality or adopting more camouflage. Eye-contact involves a deep connection that can only happen when it is reciprocated. It is the evidence that the eyes are truly the windows of the soul. Real eye-contact is deeply intimate.

Maybe it's just me, but I cannot connect with someone who is wearing dark sunglasses. I find them as depersonalising as a mask, creating a self-imposed anonymity.

In an increasingly depersonalised society, we need to cling to our individual identity before we lose it completely. Hence the need for mirrors which can be used to reinforce human identity, if one is prepared to invest the time and self-analysis to apply them effectively. We spend our entire life behind our face; it's worth getting acquainted with what the world sees and having a few words with the person in the mirror.

Such conversations need to be in the second person – YOU. Look at the reflection; look into the eyes and breathe deeply while you identify with the person you've been with all your life. Be honest about what you see, and maybe tell them You look tired, or You've had an awful day. In this duality, you can talk objectively. You can see the strengths and the weaknesses, and you can tell the person in the mirror just what they need to hear, but which nobody else can tell them with the same degree of honesty. You know the failed struggles, and the missed opportunities. You understand the dreams, the dramas, and the desire for meaningful achievements. You can express complete, unequivocal empathy, both with the person you are, and with the person you long to become. The person in the mirror understands.

This is prayer in its unified context – as it is never taught. This conversation with yourself comes from God in your soul, speaking to you in your humanity, in a spirit of pure love.

This is prayer at its most powerful, consolidating all that you are as a child of God. Bringing you into the essential close relationship without which neither you nor God is fulfilled.

This is prayer without ritual, from the heart and soul. It will live in you, feeding you with spiritual sustenance on a Daily Bread basis.

You have to learn to forgive the person in the mirror; learn to love, inspire and believe in them. They are the real God: your source of power and fulfilment.

Bob Harvey

Local groups

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

Newcomers are always welcome.

Bolton

Jim Hollyman

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In April, Karen Campbell, the URC's representative for Global and Intercultural Ministries, shared with us via Zoom on the subject of racial justice and being anti-racist in our churches. It prompted questions and discussion both during and after. In May we will be looking at Helen Bond's "Jesus – a very brief history". We are joining the Manchester group for a day session with Ben Whitney based on his book "On Still Being honest to God - sixty years on". Normally our meetings continue to be on the first Wed each month at 1.30pm until 3pm always ending with some moments of silent prayer. We meet at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. For those who find Zoom helpful, especially for those living at a distance, we send out a link.

Cornwall

Gwen Wills

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We now seem to be in full swing, despite the not inconsiderable distance some members have to travel. We chose Fraddon as it's roughly half-way down the county, but it just so happens that many members live right down the pointy end. However hopefully they think it worth the journey!

We have had some interesting and varied meetings. After our initial meeting in Jan where we spent the time getting to know each other, in Feb we discussed what we mean by 'God', followed by discussing the first part of Marcus Borg's book, 'The Heart of Christianity' in Mar. In Apr we adopted an Easter theme and talked about what we think about the Resurrection – it transpired that many of us had been reading Bishop Spong's book of that title which I think most of us found both interesting and compelling. In May we will be looking at the second part of 'The Heart of Christianity' - and possibly revisiting the first part of the book as our original discussion somehow went off on a tangent! We continue to meet on the 2nd Tue at 7.30pm at Fraddon Village Hall.

Manchester

John Ramsbottom

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We have continued to meet monthly. Although attendances have not been great, there have been some useful and interesting sessions.

In Jan we followed up on some comments about Jack Spong by watching one of his lecture DVDs obtained from the PCN library. In Feb we tried out some hymns with a more progressive theology, and these seemed to be well received. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the publication of "Honest to God" by the then Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson. The prompt for this came from Ben Whitney who has kindly supplied copies of his booklet of notes on this. Accordingly, we decided to base some of our session around this topic. Also, we are arranging a day workshop on 20 May in conjunction with the Bolton group, which Ben is going to lead.

There are plans to hold an evening experiencing the Labyrinth as a form of meditation and prayer.

We try to cover a broad spectrum of subjects which are of interest to us and are always looking for new ideas which might be worth pursuing. Our meetings are generally on the 4th Wed of the month at Heaton Moor United church in Stockport.

Newcastle

Liz Temple

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At our meetings in central Newcastle, we benefit from the knowledge, experience and inspiration of both our members and outside speakers. Generally, we look at a different source or topic monthly, making it possible for visitors to participate with ease. Since Jan we have discussed sections of two books: Brian McLaren's 'Faith After Doubt' and Ben Whitney's 'On Not Being a Christian'. In March we were all encouraged to attempt alternative versions of the Lord's Prayer. We're grateful to all who research each topic and lead our discussions. Our recent speaker vividly made us aware of the difficulties experienced by those awaiting a decision on their claim for UK asylum. The fact that claims can take years to process clearly causes uncertainty and distress. We felt moved and privileged to hear this personal story.

Northallerton

Peter Brophy

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Although only established in Feb we have attracted 13 members with a couple of others who can't make the timing but have asked to be kept informed. We have now started discussing John Shelby Spong's Unbelievable: why neither ancient creeds nor the Reformation can produce a living faith today, looking at Spong's 12 Theses. More members would be very welcome.

Teesside

Peter Brophy

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Having finished Richard Rohr's Falling Upward we have turned our attention to 2006 book, Paul Walker's I still haven't found what I'm looking for, written by a local author who was a CofE minister working as a hospital chaplain in Middlesbrough. We're a long established book club and would very much welcome new members to explore with us the questions of contemporary faith and life. Meetings are on the second Tue each month, starting at 2 for 2.30pm.

Tunbridge Wells

Sandy Elsworth

radpilgrims@gmail.com

During the pandemic our monthly meetings have been held via Zoom and mainly attended by those members not tied to a screen for a daytime job. In addition, we set up a well attended weekly Zoom. Sometimes the subject is decided in advance, at others it flows from previous or current concerns. Modes of prayer in relation to temperament, and reviews of books feature, as has the Ukraine war. Sometimes we try to unpick the meaning of over-used phrases such as 'God is love' or 'Son of God'. We have recommenced our monthly meeting in a member's home in Tunbridge Wells. If you would like to make contact, please do.

West Yorks

Michael Burn

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Our last meeting on 6 March took the form of a discussion on Linda Woodhead's webinar about whether or not ours is still a Christian country. As I write we are looking forward to the next meeting when we will consider how the eight points can be relevant to local churches. Now that we are meeting only in-person anyone who would like to join us, but who has transport problems, please make contact.

Potholes

Potholes on the Motorway of Life

Religions provide roads
to righteousness
pitted with potholes
of man's invention.

Diverted from the carriageway,
we scabble in the roadside
dirt of ignorance
squabbling over inessentials
and losing reality,
as sacrament masks
the ways of divinity
and "self" denies its message.

The deepest, most pervasive, trap
lies in closed, exclusive, truth;
defining one Way, an only way,
to approach, know, divinity.

Potholes may divert us, delay us,
but "exclusive truth" denies us
the opportunity to progress,
or find another way.

It is a major weapon in the armoury
of every organised religion;
captures and holds adherents
forms a cohesive whole.

It means power for leaders
and security for its people.

But it ties the roadway of divinity
to the fixed fantasies of its founders.

It defines how God
is to be understood;
how we are to view divinity
behind our blinkers.

Edward Conder

Letters

March issue

I enjoyed the various thoughts about God. In the end, I agree with Bob Harvey that God is within you (not wishing to separate body and soul) and with Robin Blount that we'll keep doing the best we can. Chris Vosper's assertion that a word in the English vocabulary must correspond to something existing is more problematic. Nouns can be concrete, the sort which "fit in a wheelbarrow" or abstract, which don't. "God" has transitioned from the former to the latter. In earlier cosmology, a concrete God above the sky made sense, and the idea is retained in the liturgy, much as we

still talk of the sun rising and setting. In modern cosmology, there is no place for God except within us. But panentheism suffers from the same problem as "phlogiston" did: this invisible gas was supposed to be the cause of heat. Since heat was discovered to be due to the agitation of molecules, the word has virtually disappeared. We may still talk about God in the light of our experience by which we each make God in our own image, but this does not explain the choices that we make. I prefer to think of each of us making our own god to guide us through life: the main value of religion is that it brings people together across family and other boundaries.

Biology shows that we are a product of evolution. We share almost every one of our features with some animal except our opposed thumbs and huge brains. As my Alexander teacher once commented, everything else gets recycled, and there is no reason to suppose that we won't too. I loved Chris Roe's poem "Old Man", a vision that gives me something to live up to in my nineties.

Michael Hell

Meaning of "progressive"

Yes, "youth", as our organisational future, with its search for life in sexuality - how could we express it in our eight points? e.g., People who live in the truth and reality that the mutual whole-hearted giving, (and receiving and rejoicing), of two selves in a sexual relationship is our deepest fulfilling experience of the core dynamic of existence. (Even highlight it and the fullness of "Us"), and yes, "the theology of disability", are fair priorities in our agenda, but the section of the population that is growing in percentage terms, and forecast to go on increasing, is the elderly, our individual personal and common future.

I wonder if there is a need and a scope for a group to do some exploratory thinking - metaphysical, psychological, sociological, theological - on the meaning of "progressive" in the contexts: of ME embracing dying and death, and "life everlasting", speculating about a different kind of "life" and a transfigured "ME as WE", of ME and "the communion of saints", with me engaging, now, and keeping live (not simply in memory) those who have contributed to the shaping of ME.

Tom Hinds

Notes from an ex Trustee

The reason that I stood down as a trustee for PCN is because I requested that, as an organisation PCN sign a petition against the opening of new oil fields but it was decided that this was "too political". In my opinion the signing up to this petition would only have been political with a small "p". However other trustees were concerned that the Charity Commissions would possibly censor us or takeaway our charitable status! Many other organisations have already signed it! In my opinion the next phase of thought for PCN must be what does the 'P' mean?!

We are political in that we have taken stands on climate change and gay Christians, for example, in our short films. We are **not party** political and we are not in the run-up to a general election when I know that charities cannot be seen to campaign (but big business and newspapers can and do interfere in our general elections)!

There is no point in reading Borg and Crossan, discussing the literal resurrection of Jesus and ignoring what is happening in the world and our country. It beggars belief, for example, that PCN would not sign a future petition against Braverman's idea of forcing refugees to live in a (dangerous) country such a Rwanda because it might be political!

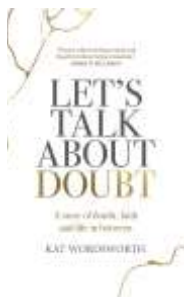
I accept that petitions are not the only way of protesting but aligning ourselves with other progressive charities does have a point! We have just had Good Friday; Jesus disobeyed the Roman authorities and paid with his life; is PCN scared of the charity commissioners? It would be helpful, I feel, if members wrote to our chair with their feelings on the 'P'; for or against my views expressed above.

Martin Bassant

PV Editor: Martin made the request to the trustees via email and several opinions were expressed in reply, but no decision was made. It was felt that it needed a fuller, and in-person discussion. The trustees regret that Martin stepped down as a trustee at the AGM and he was warmly thanked for all of his many contributions to PCN. A response from the next trustees meeting will appear in PV46.

Reviews

Let's Talk About Doubt by Kat Wordsworth, Circle Books

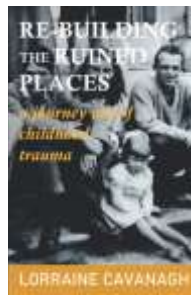


If I could have commissioned a book to be written about faith, this would be it. Kat tackles head on how she came to, and dealt with, doubt. Not just what she describes as the

more acceptable forms of doubt - is this the church for me or, what does that teaching really mean, but deep fundamental doubt 'does God exist?' She describes the shame associated with 'deep doubt' and the lengths many of us can go to avoid holding our hand up and saying 'I am not sure I believe any of this'. Her first chapter 'Lost' describes how she came to recognise and face up to this deep doubt and the angst it caused her. She also asked herself, 'why did I not just walk away?' as some famously and publicly have. Her journey continues, without God. She builds a 'purposeful life' - good work, exercise, hobbies, meditation - all that secular society has to offer. This fails to fill the void. The next step is the acquisition of knowledge about God. Override doubt with study and see if that unlocks the door. It doesn't. Behind it all is her feeling that living in a world where there is no more to life than what we see feels unbearable. Through conversations and reflections and learning inside and outside of the church, Kat came to a place of peace. I will not spoil the story by revealing the ending. I will read and re-read this book and, for those who have their own doubts and for those who support friends, families or church family members who have deep doubts, this is a book to read and to share. I am so very glad to have read it.

Chris King

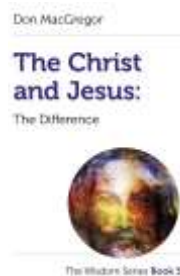
Re-Building the Ruined Places by Lorraine Cavanagh, Aмео Books 'If our experience of trauma is to be healing for others, it has to be owned and worked through again and again through the medium of what I would call grace.' In this book she shows how, through grace, she has worked through her own trauma to bring healing to others.



Lorraine is an Anglican Priest. A writer, theologian, and she has written books on spirituality and the Church. An artist, she has hosted solo art exhibitions in London, and she has served as chaplain and tutor of Spirituality in various universities. Cavanagh shares her story of growing up in a wealthy family in high society whilst experiencing emotional poverty. She writes of the negative impact that her parents' life choices had on her and her siblings and of the emotional, psychological and sexual abuse that she suffered at various hands. Safety was provided by their housekeeper who served above and beyond to shield the children from the worst excesses of the ever-changing household. Later she explores her abusers' traumatic experiences which shaped their personalities and behaviour. She does not excuse it, but she does try to comprehend it saying, 'If we allow ourselves to deconstruct our stories, we can transpose from one kind of understanding to another'. It was difficult reading but the story was well told, not sensationalising but offering understanding and healing grace. It offers insight into the long-term effect of childhood abuse and its possible redemption. For survivors, it could offer a way to process the past in a way that gives back control and 'offers light through the darkness'. She offers hope, 'In God's economy there is no such thing as wasted suffering'.

Meryl White

The Christ and Jesus: The Difference by Don MacGregor, Christian Alternative Books



This is the third in the author's Wisdom Series with three more planned. Don's stated target audience is those followers of the teachings of Jesus who are open to a wider theology and philosophy than traditional Church teaching. This certainly is the case as right from the off he begins to introduce a strongly argued case for reincarnation, a concept, maintains the author, that has always been around in spiritual understanding but

one that has been largely ignored by Christianity. Traditionally, orthodoxy has said that after this one life comes divine judgement, whereas the Wisdom tradition says the soul incarnates many, many times on its journey. MacGregor believes reincarnation is not anti-Christian, indeed it can add greatly to Christianity. Early in the book the author applies the idea of reincarnation to the person of Jesus, saying that he must have been a "human being of many incarnations, an exalted soul". So too the rest of us are evolving towards a kind of personalised Christhood – thus we are all proto-Christ in the making. Not all the book, though, is taken up with the question of reincarnation as other sections examine The Flesh and Blood Jesus, The Universal Cosmic Christ, The Mystical Christ and The Christ and other Faiths. Each chapter is followed by questions for reflection which would suit discussion groups plus there are spiritual exercises and suggested further reading and useful websites. There is much here for progressives to mull over, particularly those who thought we already knew all about the important distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Recommended reading.

Paul Harrington

Beloved & Homosexuality for Progressive Christians by Donald Schmidt, Wood Look



Homosexuality is a difficult issue for many Christians and is, regrettably, one that is proving to be divisive within the Anglican Communion. In these books we have the calm and sensitive testimony of Donald Schmidt, an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada who, in his own words is "both proudly gay and unapologetically Christian." In "Beloved" he tells his life story from his earliest years growing up in "the crazy sixties" to the present day giving us a rare insight into the challenges faced by a gay person living through the latter part of C20th. He tells us about his experiences of living in the gay



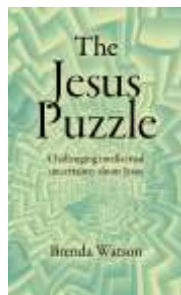
community when Aids was rife, of being “gutted” at being refused ordination by his church on the grounds of his sexuality and of his work in the United States where he was accepted for ordained ministry. He tells us openly of his time “in the closet” and his marriage to Margaret with whom he fostered two children. The marriage lasted 18 years but, in its later years, he became depressed by the situation which did not appear normal to him. This depression became so severe that he was advised by his psychiatrist to end the marriage. He continued his ministry in the United States and spent some time in Hawaii before he was able to return to Canada and was at last ordained into the ministry of the United Church. The Church recognised his calling and apologised for its actions in denying him ordination 34 years earlier. Shining through his life story is his unfaltering belief in a loving God and that he had been called by God to formal ministry. He recognises that even today they are people who challenge his right to be a minister and even to call himself Christian. To these people, he asks a simple question: “Do you really think that God says to me – [or anyone else] – that they are not good enough to be accepted as part of God’s family for any reason let alone for their sexuality?”

In *Homosexuality for Progressive Christians*, he considers the issue through a study guide – a format he has used before when writing about Easter, the Death of Jesus and two books on Women in the Bible. These books can be used for group or individual study. When used for group study, the author acknowledges that the subject is controversial and urges groups to respect the opinions of others even if one does not agree with them. The book is divided into seven sessions and at the end of each, the author sets out a number of questions to stimulate discussion. His interest in Judaism, which he studied as a student, is very much in evidence when he considers the relatively few passages which purport to deal with homosexuality in the Hebrew scriptures. Amongst the material he uses from the New Testament is the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch [Acts 8:26-39] who, as a result of divine intervention was baptised by Philip even though, under the Law [Deut.

23:1], his mutilated genitalia would at that time have barred him from being an active member of the Jewish faith community. Rather surprisingly, the author does not include in his discussions the healing of the centurion’s servant (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). Many classical scholars have argued that the relationship between the centurion and his servant was homosexual, but this did not prevent Jesus marvelling at the centurion’s great faith and healing his servant. Throughout this book we are encouraged to recognise the dangers of relying on passages of scripture which support one’s view without taking account of their context both in terms of the text in which they appear and the society for which they were written. As the author reminds us, we must look at the Bible as a whole and we will see the importance of “trying to live in God’s ways “and of “working for justice and kindness in the world”, We must strive to “love God with all our being, and to love our neighbours as ourselves”. This is of course the Great Commandment which Jesus said was the crux of all scriptures. If we follow that “we really have no space for condemning others but only for seeking to understand, love and accept one another”.

Nigel Bastin

The Jesus Puzzle by Brenda Watson, Christian Alternative



The author takes us on her journey to discover the purpose and teachings of the Historical Jesus. Her starting point is contemporary atheism and what she sees as the increasing invisibility of Christianity in public life. As a formal religion Christianity may, she suggests, deserve this fate. The problem is that having given Jesus a bad name, attributing to him all kinds of intentions which are hard to justify, he is discredited or is simply dismissed as another theological fairy tale. What is important, she argues, and the cause she pursues throughout this scholarly and very interesting book, is to discover evidence for his life and to understand the context and meaning of his teachings. Jesus did not

intend to start a new religion or found the Church, on that she is clear. Nor can or should he be held responsible for the many ‘truths’ taught by the Church in his name or the persecution and misdeeds which sometimes have followed. We need to ask, she writes, who Jesus was, what he did and what he taught. The author has another audience in mind alongside the secular critics or those who dismiss the whole story as fantasy. This other audience is believing and practising Christians, many of whom she believes to have surrounded the story, intentions and teaching of the Historical Jesus with an untouchable ‘holiness’. This she sees at worst means, that any questioning or investigation into what really happened and what he really said and did, is in conflict with faith or church teaching. Ending the divide between faith and rational enquiry would be an excellent start. Not all Christians are where the author fears they are but nevertheless there is a journey to be walked. A really great read!

Christine King

Living God’s Future Now by Samuel Wells, Canterbury Press



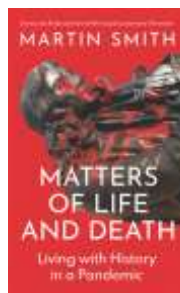
In this collection of conversations with people he describes as ‘contemporary prophets’ Samuel Wells of the HeartEdge movement creates space for a range of important theological

voices to be heard in one edited collection. Arising from a pandemic project Wells’ text is accessible and enlightening, providing something of an introduction to the work of a variety of contemporary thinkers and activists, among them are a range of familiar and scholarly figures: Lucy Winkett, Brian McLaren, Chine McDonald and Walter Brueggemann among them. A critic might note a leaning toward Anglicans and Episcopalians, at least two of the seventeen contributors (Rachel Treweek and Stephen Cottrell) wear Mitres to work. Similarly, there’s something of a bias towards academics. There’s consolation, though, for those who see HeartEdge as too firmly rooted in liberalism than in the liberative tradition, with contributions from Anthony Reddie and Steve Chalke

who bring their own perspectives to bear. Wells provides a short epilogue which feels very much pandemic-related and is a little out of context. The contributions stand alone as an introduction to the approach and work of a range of important figures in the world of faith and activism.

Simon Cross

Matters of Life and Death by Martin Smith, self-published

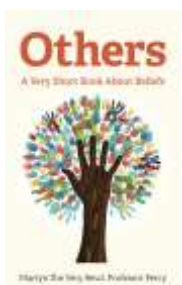


Covid and the lockdowns have moved, for many but not all, into the realm of recent history. Nevertheless, its impact on societies, governments, economies and individuals remains.

It feels important to remember and mark this time. Martin is ideally placed to do so and to help us reflect on some universal experiences. He is a documentary film maker, broadcaster, journalist, and thinker. The World at War series is just one of his contributions to the telling and writing of our history and his wide-ranging and important work, in particular on war and genocide, is renowned. Here he gives us a series of essays, originally produced as talks broadcast during the pandemic. The essays all make compelling reading and range through the personal to the political, from his own childhood experiences to reflections on genocide. Each chapter has its own story; fascinating but pointing us to look deeper at the human condition. The essays are political, in the broadest sense of that word, and they encourage us to look behind the public record. In one chapter he recalls being asked as he was leaving the Washington Holocaust Museum after two years work there what he had learned. His reply was 'Trust no one. Love your neighbour'. That same essay ends with the words of Boris Johnson 'we are all in this together'. Unless, Martin adds, you live or work in a care home. It is hard to do justice to the richness, diversity and reflection that this book contains. It is not 'religious' but, like us, it is about life in all its fullness. The title says it all. This sits on my desk, and I keep returning to it; a book that marks an era and raises new thoughts at every encounter.

Christine King

Others by Martyn Percy, Christian Alternative

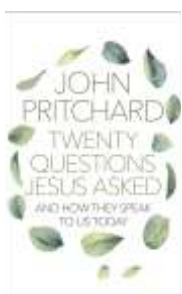


Here is a challenge about prejudices and beliefs. How do we understand others and their beliefs, and how do we get to walk a few steps in their shoes? British academic and theologian Martyn

Percy addresses these questions saying that we still don't really understand other people and what they believe. If we did, we might have an easier time of it in local, national and international politics, the same being true of churches, communities and neighbourhoods. "Just imagine Ned Flanders and Homer Simpson getting along". The eight chapters include Belief and Unbelief, Thinking Inside and Outside the Box and Un-othering Others. To finish, there is a useful section aimed at discussion groups called a "modest stimulant for thinking", posing questions but intentionally not coming up with answers. Also, there is practical advice on how to run a discussion group using the book; and a useful bibliography for further reading. A short book, long on wisdom presented in a conversational and highly readable manner. Definitely recommended.

Paul Harrington

Twenty questions Jesus asked and how they speak to us today by John Pritchard, SPCK



John Pritchard is a retired Anglican bishop who served as Bishop of Oxford from 2007-14. He is the author of a number of books including the Intercessions Handbook which

provided for many of us our initial introduction to leading intercessions. In the latest book, he considers twenty of the questions that Jesus asked during his ministry. At the start of the book, John reminds us that asking the right question can start the listener on a journey of self-discovery. Jesus, he tells us, was brilliant at asking the right question which even today "can open in one's mind a deep level of reflection on the way we live and try to follow Jesus". In the chapters which follow, he

demonstrates this by considering twenty of the questions Jesus asked during his ministry. Each chapter opens with the bare biblical text of the question and the reference to where the incident which gave rise to the question can be found in the gospel story. It is helpful to read this before moving on. What follows is the author's version of the story which he builds around the bare text bringing it to life in a picturesque way for modern eyes. As an example, in his version of the wedding in Cana, Mary is the narrator and talks like a "Mum". Thus, she tells us how handsome Jesus looks and adds "he has even used a comb". She comments on how much Jesus is enjoying himself and ponders on why he has never married. One has to smile when Mary notices the serving boys "filling cups enthusiastically" adding "Even old Uncle Jeremiah's cup, she is sorry to say, because he clearly had enough already". When she tells Jesus the wine has run out, his response is "Mother what concern is that of you and me?" At first sight, this seems rude and disrespectful. However, in this version, Mary is not offended because, as she says, "We know what each other is thinking: we have that sort of bond". Having enjoyed our time in Cana, John brings us back to our own world with his thought-provoking reflections on the "Miracle at Cana" which, he tells us, he has always loved because "it speaks of the glory and extravagance of Jesus" and it seems to be saying "You haven't seen anything yet!" Finally, he concludes the chapter with questions for us to ponder and with prayers. The question to Mary is just one of the 20 questions which feature in this book making it an interesting, enjoyable and yet demanding read. It should also act as a reminder that, in our thoughts and prayers today, Jesus can still ask us questions.

Nigel Bastin

Want to reply? Have your own burning question? A comment on a recent event? Want to check whether a thought is unique to you?

If so, please get in touch dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

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

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

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

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

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



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