

16+ Religion

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Introduction

Welcome to our Post 16 Religion section. The articles here have been written by Bob Bowie, Senior Lecturer in Religious Education Post Graduate Initial Teacher Education at Canterbury Christ Church University.

The Quest for the Historical Jesus

The quest for the historical Jesus has a history and scholarship of its own. The figure of Jesus has stimulated a fascination in the question of the historicity of the figure Jesus. This arises from a fundamental question – were the New Testament statements about Jesus actually true? If the figure of Jesus is historically reliable, is the portrait of Jesus in our traditions

singular and settled? How can we understand the experience of Jesus that many people have that suggest quite different perspectives – the Lord, the Rabbi, the Son of Man, the Son of God.

There are several phases of the quest for the historical Jesus:

Towards the question:

From the 17th Century onwards, the question of the historicity of Jesus began to emerge. Hermann Reimarus (1694-1768) distinguishes between the preaching of Jesus and the faith of Christ. Reimarus identifies the importance of understanding the Jewishness of Jesus, and the fact that this dimension needed to be understood to make sense of what Jesus did and said. He also identifies the political interpretation of Jesus' message apart from the apostles' proclamation of Christ. In the 19th Century David Strauss (1808-1874) published his *Life of Jesus* applied the concept of myth to the Jesus tradition and he sees this in the supernatural miracles which he saw as the overlaying of myth.

The liberal quest:

Scholars tried to reconstruct the historical account of Jesus. F C Baur identifies that the Synoptic Gospels had priority over John and others established the two source theory: Mark and Q, a source reconstructed by scholars. These were considered the more reliable historical accounts. There was also the development of the idea that Jesus' personality developed over time.

Collapse!

Three conclusions at the end of the 19th Century undermined the historical quest. First was the conclusion that the images of the lives of Jesus were projections from the authors. Second was the conclusion that the Gospels were expressions of the community. Thirdly was a literary conclusion that the gospel authors constructed the framework of the narratives, and therefore any attempt at understanding the development of Jesus' personality was misplaced. Alongside these trends were theological developments, such as a focus on God rather than Jesus in some work, the Pauline comment that to know the historical Jesus was not necessary (2 Cor 5.16) and the idea that Jesus belongs theologically to Judaism, while Christianity began at Easter.

The New Quest

This begins with the idea of the kerygmatic Christ, the Christ proclaimed to others in the New Testament for the purpose of conversion. This refers to an earthly figure and an exalted Christ present in all the earliest writings of Christians. There is a call decision by Jesus in the face of the presence of God, the Jesus faith, the call to freedom and the forgiveness of sins. These things are present in the New Testament and point to the kerygmatic Christ.

The third phase

The new quest began to be seen as a theological quest for Christian identity but a further sociological quest began which looked to the social history of first century society, the place of Jesus in Judaism and the non-canonical sources, such as the Gospel of Thomas.

These quests establish several things. Firstly the issue of the quest for the historical Jesus is firmly on the theological map, although there is no definitive answer. To ignore this question would seem unwise and some suggest it is vital, if difficult to actually do. There continues to be new research into the question, especially when new sources are discovered.

Further reading:

Theissen, G and Merz, A (1998) *The Historical Jesus*. Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht: Gottingen, Chapter 1, pp.1-15.

Wright, N T (1996) *Jesus and the Victory of God*. SPCK: London. Chapter 1, pp.3-25

Jesus the Jew

Jewish scholars pursued a historical search for Jesus rather than a theological search. The starting point was to question whether sufficient attention had been paid to the Jewish tradition as it was found through Jesus. Jesus the Jew was seen as an ethicist, a prophet or a rebel.

For some he was an ethicist, centred on the core moral teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures: love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Others saw him in the prophetic tradition, building on the tradition of the prophets and their rejection of the sacrificial cult which in Jesus' time was focused on the Temple in Jerusalem. Some saw him as a rebel, a worldly messiah leading a revolution against the Roman occupation.

Geza Vermes, a distinguished Jewish scholar, wrote the book *~Jesus the Jew~* (first published in 1976) in which he made the case that Jesus was not just Jewish, but he was thoroughly Jewish. He strikes out at the Christian depiction of Jesus which is theological, rather than anything remotely connected to the historical figure. Vermes sees Jesus as a carpenter, a healer, an exorcist, teacher and miracle maker. He views Jesus as part of the Galilean historical and cultural background. He argues that Pharisees were rarely in Galilee and so the conflict with the Pharisees was not an indicator of an anti-Jewish movement, but rather an expression of the conflict between Galilean Jews and Jews elsewhere. The Pharisaic opposition to Jesus in Galilee was foreign, not local. He was seen as a political figure because he was seen as Galilean.

Jesus was also in the charismatic Jewish tradition and Vermes identifies examples of exorcism from the Essene Jews, examples of the figure of the holy Man from the Hebrew Scriptures but also with similarities to the Hassidic tradition which held in the power of prayer and the possibility of miracles.

In his prophecy, Jesus was in the tradition of the Hebrew Prophets and there was a tradition of prophetic celibacy which would explain this uncommon feature of Jesus' life.

Vermes examines the titles of Jesus in detail. He examines the Son of God references and finds reason to doubt whether Jesus was really described as 'the' Son of God, but instead was consider 'a' Son of God, 'a' son of man. And of course there are many Messiah figures in Jewish history. In short, a dispassionate view of the accounts of Jesus, even in the New Testament, do not point to a radical departure from Judaism, but a mainstream Jewish figure.

Attempts to portray Jesus as anti-Jewish have more to do with the later separation of Judaism from Christianity and tensions between those communities which were more pronounced when the Gospels were written and collected together.

Vermes writes:

"The believing Christian is convinced that the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith are one and the same. For him there is coherence – identity even – between the Gospel picture and that offered by the Creed... By contrast to these imperatives of faith, the issues which writer and reader will explore together are concerned with the primitive, genuine, historical significance of words and events recorded in the Gospels... it is prompted by a single-minded and devout search for fact and reality and undertaken out of feeling for the tragedy of Jesus of Nazareth."

Further reading:

Vermes, G. (1973) *~Jesus the Jew~*. Collins: Glasgow.

wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/JJew.html

www.bbc.co.uk/thepassion/articles/jesus_the_jew.shtml

The Bible and the Word of God

Gordon Oliver (Holy Bible, Human Bible, DLT, London 2006) identifies four different senses in which Christians use the phrase 'word of God'. For Christians the Bible is the word of God but there are different ways of understanding this phrase. The Bible may 'be' the word of God, it may 'reveal' the word of God, it may 'contain' the word of God, and it may be a 'sacrament'.

The Bible 'is' the word of God

This idea implies that the Bible is identical to God and this is extended to both the Old Testament (or Hebrew scriptures) and New Testament. Scriptural references which support this are found in 2 Timothy 3:16a 'All Scripture is inspired by God', and also in the references to Jesus saying that he is speaking words given from God the Father (John 8:26; 12:49 etc.). The view is that certain people are given the Holy Spirit for the purpose of their speaking words that are Divine in origin, and these have been gathered in the Old and New Testaments. Such a view requires the understanding that God is working also in the minds of the translators. A consequence of this is that the Bible is without error. One advantage of this view is that it is straightforward and uncomplicated. One should listen to the word of God and understanding is straightforward. However a number of areas may cause difficulty with this view. First, there are issues to do with certain attitudes which appear racist or sexist and which seem to be expressed in the Bible. Secondly, there are questions about the relationship between the Bible and scientific understanding. Thirdly, there is the question of different interpretations. What happens if different listeners, perhaps from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, hear the word in different ways? This points to the question of the listener in relation to the word.

The Bible 'reveals' the word of God

With this understanding the word of God is not identified as the Bible but rather that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit as a whole and so reveals God's Word. At certain times certain texts may seem to be particularly important for groups and individuals who see specific meanings and feel the word speaking to them through those texts at certain times. For example, reference to the goodness of creation and the idea that salvation is for the whole world brings special significance through the perspective of environmental ethics at a time of concern for global warming. This perspective allows both for a historical and literary-critical perspective on texts but also the spiritual and mystical understanding of them. The word of the past speaks to the present. Experiences of suffering or injustice in the Bible help connect the listener to experiences of suffering and injustice in their own lives today and offers spiritual insights into those experiences. Thus there is a conversation between the listener and the Bible which reveals the word. Such a view does not remove some of the issues arising out of the question of different interpretations. The dynamic quality that comes out of the idea of a conversation between listener and Bible raises the possibility of quite different meanings, so what happens if this leads to opposite or inconsistent conclusions?

The Bible 'contains' the word of God

This idea suggests that the Bible has within it the doctrines or beliefs, and also guidance on ritual. For this reason certain passages are more commonly used in worship, as these may be thought of containing the Word of God in an especially important way. This in turn suggests that some passages might not be so important and here the question may be asked, which are the more important bits and which are the less? In addition, we might ask what about the belief that God continues to speak to us, after the end of the New Testament, for instance through nature, or through the worshipping community of Church? The sense that the Bible contains the word of God may also point to the idea that the listener can enter into the world of the Bible, or the country of the Bible.

The Bible 'as sacrament'

The idea of sacrament, a holy mystery which is a gift from God and a sign of the divine working in the world to transform it, is also associated with the Bible. Hearing the words of the Bible can be connected to a sense of receiving the sacramental gift of those words. This can help to provide a way of seeing the different interpretations and meanings that different Christians perceive at different times. This is the sense of a dynamic quality of sacramental transformation, a way in which the encounter between the person and God can occur through scripture. For example the story of the woman at the well in John's Gospel is used within one Christian tradition to support people who are preparing adults to be baptized. In the story the woman enters into

dialogue with Jesus and through that conversation and his words, she has an experience of transformation that leads to her own conversion. In reading this story adults preparing to become Christians may find themselves drawn into a conversation with God that can also lead them to receive the gift of the sacrament of the Bible (John 4:1-42).

Activity

Consider a passage you are studying through each of these perspectives and try to identify the different ways in which that text may be understood as the word of God.

Parables and Hermeneutics

Jesus' parables reveal the range of different approaches to interpretation, or hermeneutical method. Compare historical and reader response approaches. From an historical perspective we can always try to put the parable in the context, the situation of the time. Some parables open up a narrative world, and invite a response from the reader. Which is correct? Will they lead to a 'right' interpretation?

Dodd's definition of a parable is "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to provoke it into active thought." This is often summarised as a story with a hidden meaning, but actually key active elements here are doubt and active thought. They stimulate engagement. This is a little different from suggesting that there is a single hidden meaning that can be explained easier and definitively. They are metaphors, rather than simply analogies as they are person-centred. They are vivid, drawn from everyday life. So they are about just and unjust managers, they are focussed on agriculture, or some other aspect of culture or working life. Other scholars suggest some parables contain self-evident truths, rather than the uncertain doubts to which Dodd refers.

Anthony Thiselton (Hermeneutics, An introduction, 2009, Eerdmans, Cambridge) thinks both views are a little right, and both are a little wrong. Parables have quite different patterns and are not easily analysed or simplified by these definitions. He argues, "A parable proper catches a listener off guard. It wounds from behind. How did the prophet Nathan approach King David when God told him to expose his adultery with Bathsheba? He could simply have confronted him, but confrontation is seldom wise with Oriental kings, even an Israelite king. He told him a story... The parable draws the listener into a narrative world, and gently the application places him under attack."

Thiselton considers the different approaches including existential, historical, rhetorical and post-modern.

There are existential readings of parables. For example, in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) every worker receives an agreed upon wage. Some object feeling that justice is more important than grace, and the latecomers should not get as much as those who truly worked all day long. In tragic parables, such as the parable of the foolish maidens, the maidens presumptuously believed their wellbeing was guaranteed, that someone else would look after them and they were deceived because for a long time nothing happened.

The historical approach is concerned to establish whether the parable is authentically Jesus' words, whether it is based on the life of Jesus or the life of the early Church, whether it relates to general truths or specific situations. Many parables are concerned with the Kingdom, a central element of Jesus teaching. Some parables cannot be understood unless groups such as Pharisees, or tax collectors are understood in their historical setting. It may be argued that if we understand these elements, we are more likely to have a better grasp of the meaning.

A third approach is rhetorical and literary criticism. This focuses on the literary style, rather than historical or theological. Here patterns of language and form are sought out in the text. As dynamic and potent words they invite a reader response. They can lead to a modification of the tradition. In some parables there is a profound reversal, such as the unforgiving servant. And so in reading parables reversals or unexpected turns should be a feature of how they are understood.

More post-modern approaches are drawn from the work of Paul Ricoeur and others. Ricoeur sees the world of the active agent, and the self as a narrative world. Readers therefore are participants, active agents and not simply spectators. Dialogue with the parables and the text is what is necessary.

Do parables have a correct interpretation? For some the answer is a clear 'yes', while other approaches suggest this is not the case. Can one interpretative approach be taken over the others? Or from the other approach, is it possible to mix post-modern or reader responses with historical approaches? Consider these questions with the parables you are studying and identify how different interpretations may be drawn from these and other distinctive hermeneutics.

The Word that is the Bread of Silence

This phrase, from Paul Hoppe, a Swiss writer who died in 2006, is the starting point for a meditation by Brother François of Taizé on word and silence. He writes "One word is enough to make silence bearable, and can at times fill it completely." In an era of constant data communication, a veritable din of words – tweets and Facebook updates, messaging and email – this is a striking statement. Br François reflects on how, in reading the Bible, he withdraws into silence. It is an approach to reading the Bible that is mystical and both modern and traditional in its hermeneutic. It is the approach of a person of faith, and yet it seems strikingly radical.

Br François identifies four different approaches to reading the Bible drawing on four witnesses.

"First, a phrase from Saint John of the Cross, 'The Father has spoken only a single word, his Son; now in an eternal silence he never ceases to speak it; it is up to us to listen to it in silence.'" This is paradoxical as the Bible has a multiplicity of words but here Br François suggests the whole of the Bible could not express what God was longing to say, but that in fact that had to be expressed as a Human being.

A second approach he draws from the second epistle of Saint Peter. This does not talk of silence or words, but uses an image: "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter 1:19). This captures the sense of the darkness that perhaps surrounds the human experience and the tiny light that we look to to follow. So it is that Br François looks to the Word as it is a whole way of life that becomes light, something that demands we keep our eyes fixed on it.

Br François' third witness is St Paul who stresses especially the link between the Scriptures and faith. "...and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for Salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" writes St Paul to one of his closest collaborators (2 Timothy 3:15). If the scriptures give knowledge of salvation, then they do so by giving a taste of it, "The Scriptures allow us to 'savour' salvation."

Through the theme of taste Br François introduces a fourth approach drawing on the German Jewish Philosophy Franz Rosenzweig (d. 1929). Rosenzweig defined the difference between reading the Bible and reading any other book. He said that we learn what is in the other books by reading them but, "When it comes to the Bible, two things are necessary to learn what is there; we have to listen to what it says, and also be attentive to the beating of the human heart. The Bible and the heart say the same thing."

Br François is interested in how the Bible may be read personally and this is an example of a personal and reflective hermeneutic that is more subtle than interpretation, and is perhaps more profound for it describes the engagement of Faith in God through the text.

For Br François, "Biblical contemplation does not involve some kind of ascent toward timeless truths, but rather abandoning ourselves to the plan of God. Our gaze looks ahead, eager to follow the intentions of his loving will for humanity, intentions that have to be accomplished here on earth and throughout history. Then, while remaining involved with body and soul, we no longer feel that we have to be on top of things and events. The greatness of the Love of God has taught us to give him plenty of room and not to intervene before the time is ripe. It is God's plan that has to be accomplished as he intends it. Our looking then becomes a waiting, a "contemplative waiting" as Brother Roger used to say."

Thus in reading the text there is submission and trusting abandonment.

To read Br François' meditation go to: www.taize.fr/en_article7462.html

Theology of Evolution: Jack Mahoney

For Christians who do not reject theories of evolution, how can they begin to make sense of it in theological terms? Jack Mahoney, explores this question but he starts from a different point. How do those who study or accept evolution make sense of altruism? The ethical idea that seeks to put others first. For Mahoney, a Christian theology of altruism begins with God and the mutual self-giving of the Trinity towards each other. Jesus Christ, through the incarnation, exemplifies this altruism. Mahoney argues that Jesus a profound evolutionary advancement in the morality of humanity. It is extraordinarily profound because he confronted death, a universal human experience, and then overcame it. Mortality was an ordinary feature of human life but through Jesus Christ, we have the Evolution of this human experience.

Traditionally Christians believed that the point of the incarnation, where God became man, was to save human beings from their fallen nature. Mahoney sees in these accounts an attempt to explain death. The answer to the question 'Why does death happen?' is explained by the fallen nature of human beings. In Genesis, death was the penalty for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God became man to atone for the sins of humanity, to be the perfect sacrifice.

Mahoney thinks that these theological ideas have come about because of mistakes. First, he thinks that people have misread the Bible, in particular in the passage in Paul's letter to the Romans 5:12 where he states:

"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."

Mahoney argues that the phrase 'because all have sinned' is the translation of the Greek *eph ho*, which means 'since when'. But in Latin this was translated as *in quo* meaning 'in whom'. St Augustine concluded that all human beings were therefore born into the sin of Adam. The theology of Original Sin came into being through this translation.

Mahoney rejects the theology of Original Sin and the fallen nature of the human being at the point of birth. Without this theology, there is no need to remedy the situation. There is no need for atonement for Original Sin, without Original Sin.

This allows for death to be viewed as part of evolution. Jesus broke through death as an evolutionary step towards a new way of living according to universal altruism.

Mahoney's idea has implications for many other Christian theologies, including the concept of the dignity of the human person, the idea that human beings have some kind of inherent worth. The theology of Original Sin and the Fall had led some to reject this notion, notably Calvin and Luther. How can human beings be of moral worth, if they are such sinful beings. If human beings are not born into the world with a nature corrupted by Original Sin, then the idea that they have an inherent worth makes more sense.

This illustrates why Mahoney thinks theology and science have something to say to one another:

"Because our common human experience is being faced with a major advance in our scientific understanding of human origins, intellectual integrity invites us to place that experience alongside our past and present religious beliefs, and in the process to hope to cast light on both."

For a review of Mahoney's thinking see:

www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/christianity-in-evolution-an-exploration-by-jack-mahoney-6277479.html

And for a more detailed discussion see here: www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/BOOK_20111208_1.htm

Can We Discern the Will of God?

For many believers, of different theistic faith traditions, finding out God's will and intention for them is an important search. Some traditions hold that God has particular purposes for individual human lives. If that is the case then it must be important to discover what these purposes are. If God has a plan in mind, then this plan is important to find out. In addition to this idea of there being some big plan, or big purpose in our lives, there are also many decisions that human beings face, and many religious traditions teach that there are choices that go towards God's intended plan, and choices that turn away from that plan.

However, how can any of this be known? How can a believer be sure they are not simply masking their own preferences with the idea that they are God's will? I may have my own entirely unholy reasons for choosing an action, or pursuing a course. My own self-interest may come to affect how I read sacred texts so I pick out the message I want to see? Or I may suffer from a psychological or mental illness that leads me to believe I hear the voice of God, when in fact it is my own illness that is speaking to me, not the voice of God.

Some traditions offer specific practices to try to avoid these pitfalls and one such process is found in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola. These are a combination of prayers, meditations and contemplative practices that he developed to help deepen a person's relationship with God. Part of this involves practices that aim to set aside self-motivated wishes and desires and be receptive to the will of God. They include a process of discernment where different possible options may be explored. This seeks to help a person focus on the interior movements of our heart and perceive where they are leading.

Writing about this subject, a Jesuit called Joseph Tetlow suggests:

"Human beings are moved by a dense complex of motives, both in the things we do from day to day and in our big decisions. What drives a young woman to become a doctor or a young man to be an engineer? Many things contribute: success, altruism, interest. Or what drives a woman who has smoked for years to quit or an obese man to get thin? Again, many things contribute: fear of death, desire for health, concern of family. But they all interact in a kind of movement that eventually drives the person to act. Master Ignatius learned to think about those dense complexes of motives — images, ideas, attractions, revulsions — as 'spirits'.

Master Ignatius noted that these dense complexes of motives and energies take on two configurations, which he identified with consolation and desolation. He discovered that both consolation and desolation can move you toward God or pull you away from God. Then he noted that sometimes consolation comes from a good spirit and sometimes from a bad spirit, and he noted the same thing about desolation."

(see ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/discernment-in-a-nutshell/)

The spiritual exercises provide help in interpreting major decisions and daily experience. They act as a guide when considering the possible choices we may make and point to the truer way forward. However, the process is not easy. It requires inner quiet and an ability to reflect on one's interior life. It takes practice and is some kind of art. It provides a framework, rather than a programme. One step in becoming more confident in this framework is by making prayerful reflection part of everyday life. One such reflection is known as the Examen and it involves 5 stages:

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

For more go here: ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/

One thing this does mean is that the process of trying to find out how we should live, what we should do, is viewed by some Christians as a whole-life process of learning how to be, not simply something that can be easily dipped into and then discarded. This is a very challenging message in a world dominated by notions of 'on-demand' and 'one-click' solutions. Perhaps it also offers much greater depths in return.

For more about Ignatian spirituality visit: ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/.

Christian Communities

There are many Christian communities where lay people come and spend time living in community with others for periods of time. This article considers three of these.

The Pilsdon Community

The Pilsdon Community aims to “provide an environment where people can rebuild their lives after experiencing a crisis, whether sudden or progressive”. It has been working since 1958 to offer refuge to people in crisis, those working through depression, alcoholism, addiction, divorce or bereavement. The community welcomes those who want to spend time reflecting on life before making a decision for a change in direction and people come from a wide range of different backgrounds and situations.

The community is founded on friendship, hospitality and traditional Christian charity. Everyone who stays at Pilsdon be they guest, visitor, wayfarer, volunteer or community member participates fully in the life of the Community.

Pilsdon is an Anglican foundation but the community is ecumenical. There are now two Pilsdon communities. The original is in Dorset (www.pilsdon.org.uk) and a second community is established at West Malling (www.pilsdonatmalling.org.uk).

The communities seek to be self-sufficient. At West Malling there is an extensive vegetable garden with livestock and greenhouses. Visitors are welcome to join the community for prayer. Volunteers may be residential or non-residential. Residential volunteers stay for six months helping with the community life, the animals, gardens and other aspects of community living.

The community of Pilsdon describe what their life offers in this way:

- You will be living in a safe place away from pressures of daily living
- You will be living in a ‘dry’ and drug-free house
- You will have ‘thinking’ time and opportunities to ‘reconnect’ with family if this is your aim
- The environment provides an opportunity to become more aware of the land and the seasons and to experience a real sense of peace

Pilsdon provides a rhythm to life with communal, home-cooked meals

- A pattern of work where you can use your skills or learn new ones
- An opportunity to join in daily worship or simply be aware that it is happening
- Times to relax and have fun using or acquiring artistic talent
- Opportunities to take part in sport, join in card and board games, or sit chatting
(from www.pilsdon.org.uk/pilsdon_people.htm)

The Iona Community

(www.iona.org.uk)

“The Iona Community is a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship.”

The Iona Community includes members, associates, volunteers and friends who share in different ways an experience of the liberating power of Jesus Christ and a commitment to the personal and social transformation that come from the Gospel values.

There is a common rule which include daily prayer and Bible reading, mutual sharing, regular meeting time and action and reflection for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Local groups meet throughout the year and all connected to the community work on themes related to justice, peace and creation. There is strong opposition to nuclear weapons, campaigns against the arms trade and for eco-justice. The community is anti-racist and works against poverty. It is concerned with issues of human sexuality and ecumenism.

The community has island centres and a mainland base in Glasgow. There are opportunities to come and stay and work with the community and the community provides a rich range of worship resources centred around the themes of their work.

The Corrymeela Community

(www.corrymeela.org)

The Corrymeela Community expressed its aims as follows. It seeks to:

“Be a Christian community of reconciliation following the way of the gospel.

Be in positive relationship with people regardless of class, religious opinion or political conviction.

Create safe spaces where people of diverse backgrounds can come and meet each other, where there is an atmosphere of trust and acceptance and where differences can be acknowledged, explored and accepted. Work to realise a society whose priorities are justice, mutual respect, the participation of all, concern for the vulnerable and the stranger, stewardship of resources, and care for creation.”

Corrymeela has been working for 41 years and operates programmes around family, community interfaith, youth, schools, faith and life. The community operates two residential centres (Ballycastle and Knocklayd) and an administration centre at Corrymeela House, Belfast. The community articulates values of welcome, hospitality and ‘safe-space’. The community works to develop dialogue and a sense of an inclusive community. As well as a rich range of programmes, there are many opportunities for volunteering.

The Hour of Your Death

A new film plays with an idea of life in which humans have a clock on their arm with the time they have left to live decreasing by the passing moment. This is science fiction but it is possible for any individual person to have extensive DNA testing to reveal a picture of likely long term outcomes. For example it is possible to find out whether you have the mutation gene that will mean you will probably develop Parkinson’s disease, as one CEO of a medical technology company discovered. When asked if he would have preferred not to have known he argued that he still felt it was worth it, not least because he discovered other things that were important for his children to know, that might mean they could avoid some dangers.

If we were asked, would we prefer to know the moment of our death, how would we answer? Would that knowledge enable us to live life better in the meantime or would we be unable to enjoy the moments we had? Perhaps the Church pews, synagogue and other places of worship would be fuller as a result.

It could be argued that we live in an imaginative space. In that space we pretend we are immortal, that we can never die and that life will go on indefinitely. Is this unreasonable? Surely we cannot live life while constantly thinking about the end of days. We must attend to the experience of life that we have. However, do we kid ourselves we will never die, and hide away from that reality?

Religions have sometimes been accused of feeding a pretence, with the promise of eternal life, heaven or rebirth. But that is not a full picture. Religion is full of reflections on the harder experiences of life. In Buddhism, for example, the recognition of impermanence, suffering and death, and the exercise of detachment are seen as necessary stages of development. In the Hebrew scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) a glance at the psalms show reflections of a much more realistic encounter with the realities of life (for instance see Psalm 17 or 140). Here we hear the prayers of the ancient Israelites, much read throughout the ages, perhaps because they seem to capture the experience of the struggle of life, as well as hopes for the future. These sources provide consolation, say the things we may find hard to say, and perhaps offer some hope to face the impossible challenges life may present us.

What all of the religions point to is a need to prepare spiritually to face the ultimate questions life throws at us, but also to be mindful and attentive to the present moment. In Buddhism this is captured by the idea of mindfulness. In Christianity there is a sense of the importance and sanctity of each moment of life that we have. Somehow a balance must be struck between living life to the full and preparing to meet the challenges of life and the transition to whatever there might be after this life.

12 Steps to a Compassionate Life

Karen Armstrong's 2010 book takes the work developed in her previous book, *The Case for God*, and the work around the 'Charter of Compassion' to develop an approach to building up a global community in which all people can live together in mutual respect. Learning to live together might be a byline for this idea, which builds on the ancient concept of the Golden Rule, 'do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you'. For Armstrong this ethical maxim is the test of true spirituality.

The Council of Conscience is a multi-religious group of notable individuals from Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic and Jewish backgrounds. They have agreed and articulated a charter which is focused on compassion, solidarity and the inviolable sanctity of all human beings. It calls on all people to put compassion at the heart of morality, reject interpretations of scripture that breed violence, hatred or disdain, and ensure that youth are given accurate information about other religions, appreciate diversity and cultivate an informed empathy with those who suffer. In her book she establishes twelve steps to achieve this.

The First Step: Learn about Compassion

The Second Step: Look at your Own World

The Third Step: Compassion for Yourself

The Fourth Step: Empathy

The Fifth Step: Mindfulness

The Sixth Step: Action

The Seventh Step: How Little We Know

The Eighth Step: How Should We Speak to One Another?

The Ninth Step: Concern for Everybody

The Tenth Step: Knowledge

The Eleventh Step: Recognition

The Twelfth Step: Love Your Enemies

To find out more about the twelve steps visit:

blog.ted.com/2011/01/12/on-the-12-steps-to-a-compassionate-life-qa-with-karen-armstrong/