

# Spaceforsoul

[www.spaceforsoul.org.uk](http://www.spaceforsoul.org.uk)



## Newsletter March 2023

### Dear Friends,

We hope this newsletter finds you well. We hope you will enjoy following some of the links attached and that these help you in your spiritual journeys.

In this issue:

- **Zoom Soul Space** Topic and Link for this week's gathering Wednesday March 15<sup>th</sup> 7.00 p.m.
- **The future of religion** Notes and resources
- **Was Jesus a Christian?** Notes and resources
- **Celtic theology:** focusing on the theme of **Interwoven Threads:** notes and resources
- **Future Soul Space** dates and topics/spiritual practice
- **Local events** of interest
- Poems and prayers

### Soul Space Zoom Session Wednesday 15 March 2023

"The universe is made of stories, not of atoms." (Muriel Rukeyser)

Throughout history we have told ourselves stories to try and make sense of life, the universe and everything. Stories are the way we make sense of our own lives and the lives of others. Storytelling is the most powerful communications tool in history.

If you would like to join the meeting please contact – [Space4SoulBristol@gmail.com](mailto:Space4SoulBristol@gmail.com) and we will forward the link.

### **'What is the future of religion'**

We were inspired by a new BBC 4 radio series, 'The New Gurus' .

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0dnlp6t>

The first episode talked about a book, 'Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World' by Tara Isabella Barton. In it she suggests that whilst people may be turning away from institutional religion they are still looking for what religion has always provided, meaning, purpose, community and ritual. She suggests that just like the protestant reformation needed the printing press so the 'new religions' need the internet. Our conversation considered how attitudes to religion are changing and what the implications may be for Space for Soul locally and the church and Christianity more generally.

## 'Was Jesus a Christian?'

One interesting source for this discussion was the book by **Amy-Jill Levine** entitled "**The Misunderstood Jew**". CG member Anne says: "I found it incredibly interesting to look at Jesus from a Jewish perspective: it turned many of the beliefs that I had grown up with on their head." Jesus was a Jew. You could be forgiven for forgetting this as so often Christians and Christian churches seem to have done. Did he ever intend to set up a new religion? How much of our beliefs and perspectives been developed over the centuries with no basis in the roots of Jesus's teaching? To what extent have we completely failed to take account of the context in which the scriptures were written?

Amy-Jill Levine is a New Testament scholar and teacher who brings such a refreshing approach, coming as she does from a Jewish perspective.

Here are a few notes from the book which discuss some of the earliest developments in the spreading of the word about Jesus and how they came to divide and separate from the Jewish perspective:

Paul, who was a devout Jew and a Pharisee, following his 'road to Damascus' transformation, went for some years into Arabia where he would have met with other followers of Jesus and "together they started the process of articulating of theology that will translate the Jewish Jesus into a gentile saviour" *Levine p 65*

Jews believed the arrival of the Messiah would herald the "end times" signified by the resurrection of the dead and the final judgement. Paul believed that Jesus was the Messiah. However the "end times" and Jesus's return were clearly not yet taking place. His conclusion was that the cross could be understood as a sacrifice: it proved that Jesus paid the penalty for human sin, that he had "died for the ungodly" *Romans 5:6*. He introduced the idea that Jesus had "justified by his blood" fallen humanity and the notion that through Jesus people can be saved from the wrath of God.

This was a significant departure from the Jewish belief that God already had the power to forgive sin and didn't need some strange sacrifice in order to do so. They also believed in the resurrection of the dead.

A generation later the church would rephrase Paul's statements so that the salvation became coeval with baptism. Most Jews would not have accepted Paul's claims any more than they would have accepted a Messiah without a messianic age. For Jews the notion of a crucified Messiah who brings about salvation from death and sin by his own death would have both ridiculous and redundant, Levine states. Paul recognised this he says in *Corinthians 1: 23* "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles "

It was during the time that Paul and Barnabas were travelling around with this gospel, taking the message to both Gentiles and Jews, and founding communities united in the belief that the Messiah had come, that these groups would receive the name "Christian", which could well have been a pejorative term, meaning a "partisan of Christ" or member of the "Christ party".

It is interesting to note that the titles the "son of God" or "god from god" or "saviour" were all titles given to Caesar, the Roman Emperor.

While Paul had been evangelising to the Gentiles and making it clear that they did not need to convert to Judaism for example by circumcision, Peter and the other apostles had been in and around Jerusalem spreading the good news to the Jews. Thus Peter

and the apostles were spreading their message within the Law while Paul was evangelising apart from the Law.

Thus we see the beginnings of the departure from the message and the context of Jesus and the development of a new religion.

### **Celtic theology: focusing on the theme of Interwoven Threads**

The Celtic knot and other forms of Celtic design with their interwoven patterns are quite widely familiar. The Celtic Cross is a landmark and symbol known to many. These patterns and crosses are often used in contemporary jewellery and various art-forms.



The beautiful thing about many Celtic designs is their simplicity combined with their complexity. The simplicity is found in the fact that they are made up of a single thread, with no visible beginning or end. The complexity is found in the challenge of interweaving with that one single thread, so that it seamlessly goes over and under itself. This “thread” may be made of metal, carved in stone, drawn in pen and ink, painted, or stitched onto fabric. There is almost always symmetry in Celtic designs which, aesthetically, always seems to have its own natural beauty. The simple Celtic knot, illustrated above left, known as the Trinity and the slightly more complex Triquetra (centre and right), are said to symbolise the Trinity, the Triune God which is widely regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of Christian theology” Alister McGrath in his book: **Christian Theology: An Introduction**, refers to the inability of human language to do justice to the transcendent.

Celtic crosses are common in cemeteries across Ireland and Scotland and are also found in Wales, England and across Europe. The Celtic cross has a circle around the intersection of the arms of the cross. Celtic crosses often have carved detail of interwoven threads. There are different views about its origin and significance, some maintaining that the circle stems back to pagan times, representing the sun-god, and others believing that the circle represents creation, thus combining a symbol of God’s creation with the symbol of the cross. There is no incongruity between these two views as pagan/local cultural and pre-Christian symbols and traditions have been incorporated into Christianity around the world. In art the most famous examples of the interweaving threads and other Celtic designs are The Book of Kells and the illustrations in the Lindisfarne Gospels.

In his book, *Listening to the heartbeat of God*, Newel talks of “the Celtic churches emphasis on the presence of God at the heart of all life and within all people” After the Synod at Whitby in 664CE decided that the Roman church should be *the* church of Britain, he says “Although formally rejected by the Church at large, the stream of Celtic spirituality survived. In the following centuries, especially in the art of the Celtic world, the same vision would be expressed in new and imaginative ways. The great high standing crosses and the illuminated gospel manuscripts incorporated designs

that symbolised the interlacing of God and humanity, heaven and earth, spirit and matter.”

John O’Donoghue, in his book *Anamcara*, talks about the Celtic circle of belonging. He discusses the circle of day and night, light and darkness, the rhythm which this engenders and the journey which life involves from darkness into light.

Many Celtic theologians talk passionately about nature, which for many of us is our constant reminder of God or the Divine’s Creation. John O’Donoghue says: “Since the Celts were a nature people, the world of nature was both a presence and a companion. Nature nourished them; it was here that they felt their deepest belonging and affinity. Celtic poetry is suffused with this warmth, wonder and belonging”.

Celtic art also features birds and animals and there are many stories, according to Michael Mitton, of Celtic saints showing love for animals and birds “and, indeed, many stories of animals and birds showing concern for the saints.” Here we see the natural world and the human world interwoven as God intended. So often today it has become separated. People can live their entire lives indoors, perhaps looking at screens, totally cut off from the rhythm of natural life which is fundamental to their being. Even in communal worship, most strands of Christian faith have cut themselves off from the natural world by building great edifices of stone in which to ‘meet with God’. Calvin Miller says: “..by the time I visited Iona.. I was convinced that we who serve an entirely indoor God have lost a great part of our faith. We must break through the cold hard walls of our institutionalised worship and reach for the soft, warm, reality of God that is found out of doors... Our indoor God is too small. We need to view him through the universe he created.”

Almost all Celtic patterns and symbols are symmetrical. This could be seen to represent balance which is also a constant theme of Celtic writers. John O’Donoghue writes: “In order to keep our balance, we need to hold the interior and exterior, visible and invisible, known and unknown, temporal and eternal, ancient and new, together.” He also talks about the power of love in creating balance. Many other writers talk about the greater balance between the masculine and feminine within the Celtic tradition compared, for example, to the Roman tradition. Michael Mitton says: “We find in the Celtic church, then, an impressive acceptance of the feminine.... Had we been allowed to pursue the natural faith that the Spirit of God first breathed upon this land which contained a far more just attitude to women that was experienced in the church elsewhere, then our shameful history of repression of women may not have developed.... We would also have had a far healthier attitude to sexuality generally affirming the masculine and feminine within ourselves and within our communities.”

Perhaps Celtic spirituality could help to heal the divisions in the mainstream churches concerning sexuality. This continues to be one of the most difficult and divisive issues in the church today. Our view perhaps might be: if we could approach human sexuality as an unbroken, interwoven cord, made up of a variety of beautiful threads, rather than as dichotomous, binary, and monochrome, then perhaps we could achieve balance and harmony.

Much of the history of Celtic Christianity is based in community. Early Irish and ‘British’ Christians, dedicated to spreading the news about Jesus Christ, set up monastic communities. Often these special people set up several in his or her lifetime; those such as David (who became the patron saint of Wales), Columba, Brigid, Aiden, Hilda and many more. What is striking when reading about many of these Celtic Christian communities is that they were not cut off from the rest of society, but rather were at

the heart of society, providing not just for spiritual welfare but for a wide range of social and physical needs which Michael Mitton describes as "a primitive 'welfare state'." "The Celtic church modelled a community life that was non-exclusive and deeply attractive to a confused and broken society."

He goes on to say "In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, where we see evidence of so much polarisation, not only in our world but in the church as well, more than anything else we need a church to model a Spirit-inspired community, where people demonstrate a commitment to overcoming the differences that have too easily divided us." Mitton says: "Yet here, in the Celtic church, there are common roots that go back long before our days of separation." The concept of interwoven threads permeates the writing of those who are actively exploring and writing on the Celtic Christian faith tradition and it is one which provides not only great insights but also healing.

The history of the church, he argues, is of different groups focusing on individual strands such as evangelism or Pentecostal/charismatic approaches or concerns with social justice and each of these tend to form the basis of different and competing denominations. But in the Celtic Church, he says, you find a community of faith that was refreshingly free from prejudice, open to welcoming many strands into the cord of faith.

The different strands which Michael Mitton discusses in his book "Restoring the Woven Cord" are:

- prayer
- spiritual battle (*involving saints with demons and evil spirits*)
- ministry of women
- wild goose (*spirit of adventure*)
- community
- creation
- evangelism
- prophecy, authenticity
- Bible
- children
- creativity
- death and the dead
- healing and miracles.

### **Some poems:**

Here are the links to the two poems used in this Soul Space gathering:

John O'Donohue: For a new beginning

<https://openspacemindfulness.com/for-a-new-beginning/>

John O'Donohue: Blessing of your work

<https://uuwestport.org/blessing-of-your-work-by-john-odonohue/>

### **Some reading:**

Michael Mitton **Restoring the Woven Cord: strands of Celtic Christianity for the church today** pub Darton, Longman and Todd

J Philip Newell **A New Harmony: The Spirit, The Earth, and The Human Soul** pub Saint Andrews press 2012

J Philip Newell **The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings** pub Skylight Paths Publishing 2015

John Philip Newell in **Listening to the heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality** pub SPCK 1997

John O'Donohue **Anamcara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World** pub Bantam books 1997

J Philip Newell **Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace** Canterbury press 2011

Ray Simpson **Exploring Celtic Christianity** pub Kevin Mayhew 2004

### **Future dates for your diary:**

**April 2<sup>nd</sup> Soul Space** Face to face gathering at the Old Library, Easton  
**Nichiren Buddhism** and chanting with guest speakers Phil and Ian  
<https://sgi-uk.org/>

**April 19<sup>th</sup> Zoom Soul Space:** to be advised

**May 14<sup>th</sup> Soul Space** Face to face gathering at the Old Library, Easton (a week later than normal due to the coronation weekend)  
**Focussing** facilitated by Vicki

**May 17<sup>th</sup> Zoom Soul Space: Quantum Theology** facilitated by Heather

**June 4<sup>th</sup> Soul Space** Face to face gathering at the Old Library,  
Clowning facilitated by Catherine or Transcendental Mediation with Nirmala (tbc)

**AGM: July 2<sup>nd</sup>** This will be an opportunity to meet, chat and catch up with the significant developments over this past year. All invited to bring food to share.

### **Events:**

#### **The Future of the Celtic Past: with John Bell**

Ammerdown Interfaith Retreat Centre, near Radstock, south of Bath.

(This a fabulous place for a retreat, giving yourselves some time in a beautifully spiritual and friendly space)

<https://www.ammerdown.org/> for more information and details of courses and events.

This is an exploration of what, from the Celtic Traditions of previous eras, has not just a relevance today, but a contribution to make to such varied issues as ecology. To book go to : [admin@ammerdown.org](mailto:admin@ammerdown.org)

Monday 14 - Thursday 17 August Residential - £538 Non Residential - £364

**Local venue** to meet up and discuss spiritual themes (optional) whilst you dig, plant and crop in an allotment: Hazelnut Community Farm

<https://hazelnutcommunityfarm.com/>



**Fabulous exhibition!** If you miss this one, it comes to Wells Cathedral in October.

# Bath Abbey

7th January to  
19th March

## Threads through Creation

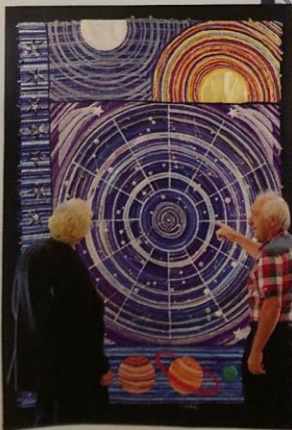
spectacular scenes in silk by Jacqui Parkinson

### A vibrant combination

This is an astonishing display of twelve huge embroidered panels. Inspired by Genesis, the first book in the Bible, textile artist Jacqui Parkinson retells its wonderful story in a vibrant combination of silks, hand-dyed materials, metallic leathers, gold leaf – with eight million stitches!

### Twelve huge panels

Jacqui has a national reputation for spectacular, large scale work. Her exhibitions have been displayed in many cathedrals and attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. This exhibition is touring twenty cathedrals. The panels are nearly 3m high and up to 4m wide. They start with strong elemental pieces illustrating the first 'days' of creation; then they become more complex and exuberant, as the story takes us into the Garden of Eden.



### Perfect for family, friends and schoolchildren

You'll find the work eye-catching and very attractive. Children love it. And it's especially fascinating for anyone who stitches, being able to see Jacqui's unique techniques close up.

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Please check the  
Abbey website for  
daily opening times:  
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