

Awakening

A Spaceforsoul publication

December 2019

On being a bad Christian

For as long as I can remember, I have always been strongly drawn to the person and teachings of Jesus and to the way of being he evidenced in his encounters with others. But at the same time, I struggled for many years in mid-life and beyond with seeing myself as 'a bad Christian'. I did not believe all that I was asked to believe. I wrestled with creeds and doctrines that did not make sense to me and that I could not give assent to. And until relatively recently, my relationship with the sacred text of my tradition has been a profoundly ambivalent one. I often came away from reading the Bible feeling unsure what to make of it all, bewildered, confused, skeptical, doubting or even repelled by some of what I encountered in its pages.

I had never felt fully at home in my tradition and often found myself wondering whether I could with integrity call myself a Christian. I had so many questions and doubts and sometimes it felt as if I was only holding onto my faith by my fingertips. I felt like the black sheep in the fold, like the square peg in a round hole that I could not quite fit myself into, like the prodigal daughter who could not find her way home.

And then everything changed when a fellow Christian introduced me to a book with an intriguing title: 'How to be a bad Christian.' The book is by a Christian priest and writer, Dave Tomlinson, and in its pages, I encountered a version of Christianity I had never come across before.

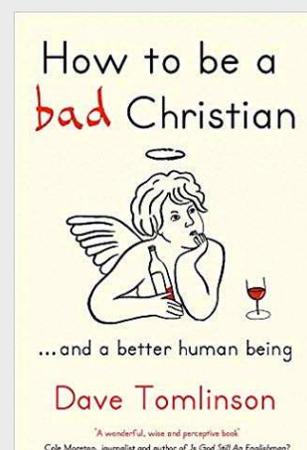
Dave wrote the book, he says, 'for countless ordinary people who may cringe at organised religion, have little time for creeds and doctrines and churchgoing, yet nevertheless attempt, albeit falteringly, to live in the spirit of Christianity or true religion - to be 'in the way'.

I discovered that I am indeed a bad Christian but that being a bad Christian - or at least the kind of bad bad Christian that Dave talks about in his book - is not a bad thing. I discovered that being a Christian is not about believing everything I am supposed to believe or about conforming unquestioningly to a rigid set of rules that often make little sense to me. It is about learning to 'think with the soul' as Dave puts it, to be continually searching for deeper answers to the questions that really matter - not an easy path to tread as it so often leads me into having to deconstruct and reconstruct my faith as I move through life.

But above all else, it is about embracing a revolutionary way of being - the way of Love that Jesus and other wisdom teachers have taught us across the centuries through their teachings and through the way they have lived their lives. Dave points out that the early followers of Christ were known simply as 'people of the Way' and that is how I like to think of myself now.

I am 'a bad Christian', a woman 'of the Way' who tries and often fails to sit at Jesus' feet and walk in his footsteps. And I have finally found myself a home.

Kaitlyn Steele

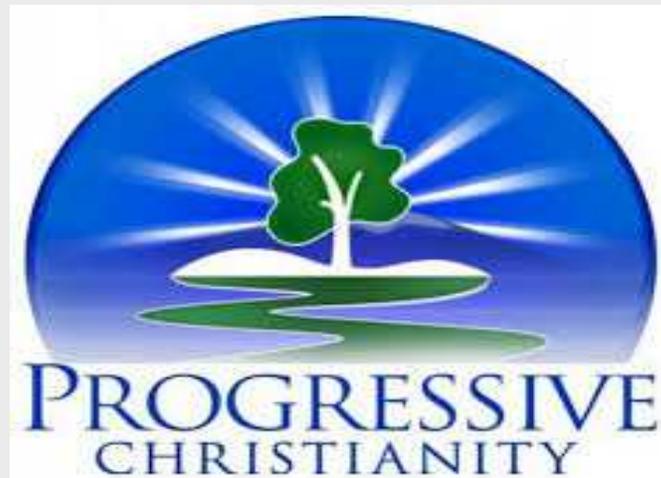


'A Christian is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along it, and who has at least some dim and half-baked idea of who to thank.'

Frederick Buechner

Progressive perspectives:

In this new series of articles, we will be exploring a number of concepts, teachings and issues from the perspective of progressive Christianity. We will be drawing on the writings of a number of well-known progressive Christian theologians such as Marcus Borg, John Philip Newell and John Shelby Spong and on some of the principal findings of contemporary biblical scholarship. We begin with an exploration of what we mean when we use the term 'progressive Christianity'.



What is progressive Christianity?

'Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.'

Rainer Maria Rilke

In his book 'The Heart of Christianity', Marcus Borg claims that 21st century Christians are living in a time of paradigm change and conflict. The conflict is not simply a matter of a number of specific differences in the way we think theologically or in the values and practices to which we adhere. As Borg sees it, the conflict is between 'two comprehensive ways of seeing Christianity as a whole'. He identifies two key paradigms - what he calls 'the earlier paradigm' and 'the emerging paradigm.'

The earlier paradigm is the one with which most of us are familiar. It is the one that most of us will have grown up with and for many of us, it may be the only one we know about. This is the paradigm that requires us to believe that Christianity is the only true religion. It demands that we view the Bible as a divine rather than a human product, as being 'God-breathed' and therefore infallible. It asks us to embrace a literal rather than a historical and metaphorical understanding of its sacred texts. It rests on a particular conceptualisation of the Divine as an 'out there', supernatural, person-like being who has a separate existence from the universe he created. And it sees this particular version of Christianity as the only legitimate way of being Christian.

'Progressive Christianity is an open, intelligent and collaborative approach to the Christian tradition and the life and teachings of Jesus that create pathways into an authentic and relevant religious experience.'

Progressive Christianity.org

There is, however, another version of Christianity. Borg calls it 'the emerging paradigm'. Brian McLaren calls it 'the new Christianity'. This new paradigm began to surface well over a hundred years ago and over the last thirty years or so, has become an increasingly important grassroots movement within mainline Christianity. More recently, it has come to be known as progressive Christianity.

Why use the word 'progressive'? Gretta Vosper, another progressive voice within the Christian tradition, argues that in order to understand progressive spirituality, we first have to understand the nature of progressive thinking. Progressive thinking, as she sees it, is thinking that moves us forward, that takes us beyond where we have been. It is characterised by open-mindedness; by a respect for and willingness to learn from the ideas of others; by a preparedness to think outside the box of tradition and orthodoxy; and by a commitment to search passionately and creatively for new ways of seeing and new understandings.

There are progressive forms of all the major world religions - for example, the Gülen movement within the Islamic tradition, the Sadhana movement within Hinduism and Liberal Judaism. And these different progressive movements generally have a number of key principles and beliefs in common. Firstly, they rest on a strong commitment to what is known as 'pluralism' - that is, the belief that there is more than one path to the Divine and that we are, therefore, free to draw from the wisdom of other spiritual traditions as well as from that of our own. This is a philosophy that inevitably leads us into open-minded interfaith dialogue in which we are genuinely willing to learn from each other's traditions and deeply committed to the search for what unites us.

Secondly, progressive spirituality is characterised by its search for religious ways of thinking which are intellectually credible in the light of modern scientific and psychological knowledge and understanding. There is in this a recognition that science and psychology are not the enemies of religion and that both the language and that the insights of these modern disciplines are not as different as they might seem from those of the world's religions.

Progressive spirituality also acknowledges the value and importance of mystical experience - our direct, personal experience of the Divine - in our spiritual lives. In so doing, it affirms our individual spiritual autonomy and reminds us that doing good theology requires us to draw not only on our sacred texts and traditions, but also on our personal experience and our ability to use our reason to make sense of it.

Thirdly, progressive spirituality rests on a view of the self as sacred. Rather than seeing human nature as intrinsically flawed or sinful, it views each individual self as an embodiment of the Divine. As the progressive writer, Gordon Lynch, puts it, each of us 'carries a spark of the divine essence' because the Divine is present within us 'in the very fabric of our beings'. Embracing this more positive view of human nature inevitably leads us into a deep-seated belief in the equality of all people, irrespective of gender, race, culture, sexual orientation and spiritual tradition. It is also the foundation on which progressive spirituality's radical inclusiveness and welcoming of diversity rests.

And finally, there is within progressive spirituality a primary emphasis on the importance of moving towards an authenticity of being - of being true to ourselves - and of enhancing our human capacity for love, kindness and compassion. There is in this a recognition that how we live our lives is far more important than what we believe. As Dave Tomlinson puts it, 'beliefs are overrated... faith is not primarily something in the head enclosed in words and concepts; it is more a fire in the belly, a gut instinct that we sense, which determines the way we live.' Mature faith is not unquestioning faith. It is not about holding onto a set of beliefs which are set in concrete for all time. It is not a creed we have to be able to sign up to. It is a way of life, a way of being we aspire to.

So what is it that progressive Christianity can offer us? It can give us a new way of understanding faith, the Divine and the Christian life. God is not a supernatural

being 'out there', but an all-encompassing Presence 'right here', a Presence in whom we live, move and have our being. At its heart, faith is not about believing 'the right things' in order to gain eternal life. It is about connection, relationship and transformation. It is about seeking to deepen our relationship with ourselves, with the world we inhabit and with the Divine in order to transform ourselves and the world in which we live.

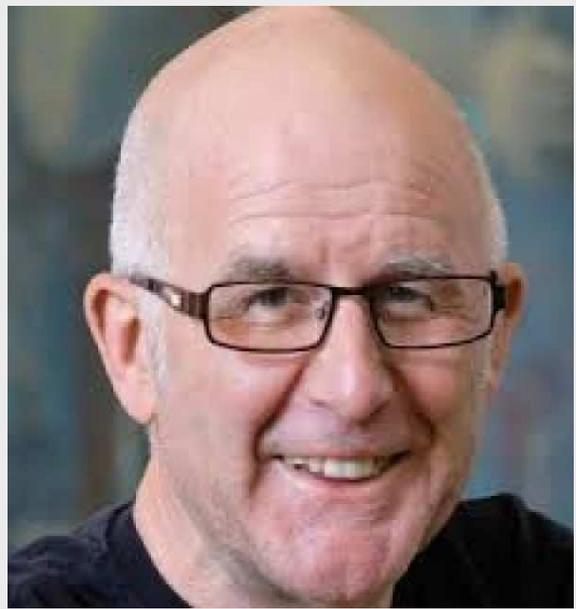
An extract from www.progressivechristianity.org ...

By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who...

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;
2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;
3. Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, believers and agnostics, women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all classes and abilities;
4. Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;
5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;
6. Strive for peace and justice among all people;
7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth;
8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

Progressive voices: Dave Tomlinson

Dave Tomlinson is a retired Church of England priest, the author of seven books and a passionate promoter of progressive Christian theology and practice. He has been variously described as ‘a distinctly alternative clergyman’, ‘a liberal evangelist’ and after taking the funeral of the trainrobber, Ronnie Briggs a few years ago, ‘the villain’s vicar’. Never one to shy away from controversy, he set up a church called ‘Holy Joes’ in a pub, wrote a book entitled ‘How to be a bad Christian... and a better human being’ and preached on one occasion at the controversial non-religious community known as the Sunday Assembly in London, a community which was in part inspired by his book.



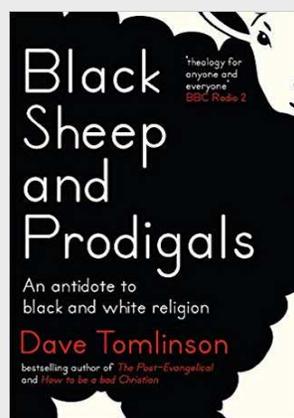
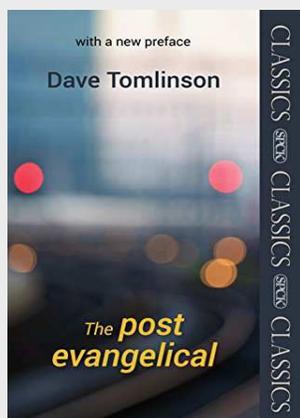
Dave was brought up in the Plymouth Brethren which he described as ‘a very fundamentalist kind of Christianity - a new Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Scripture’. The culture was, however, too narrow and legalistic for him and a powerful spiritual awakening in his teens drew him into the charismatic house church movement of the 1970s. Indeed, he was a national leader in the movement for a number of years before eventually walking away from it to become an Anglican priest.

In 1995, he published his first book entitled ‘The Post-Evangelical’. In this book which was highly controversial at the time, he acknowledges and explores the disenchantment he and so many others feel with what he call ‘evangelical orthodoxy’ and questions whether it could survive in the post-modern world. He never intended, he says, ‘to set up an alternative movement within evangelicalism’. Instead, he simply wanted to enable those of us who struggle to make sense of the Christian faith within our 21st century postmodern culture to find a way forward.

In a follow-up book, ‘Re-enchanting Christianity’, he went on to explore whether becoming re-enchanted with Christianity is possible in our post-modern, post-Christian age. But he is perhaps best known for three of his later books entitled ‘How to Be a Bad Christian’, ‘A Bad Christian’s Manifesto’ and ‘Black Sheep and Prodigals’.

For many people, Dave’s writings are like a breath of fresh air. They offer us an alternative version of Christianity which takes us right back to its roots - ‘God without the guff’ as he describes it. They remind us that it is possible to ‘to ditch religion’ without losing faith, that we can ‘bump into God’ anywhere, that everything in the universe has the potential to point us to the Divine.

And they introduce us to a new approach to faith that he calls ‘black sheep spirituality’. This is a faith which is stripped of the doctrines and the dogma that are a stumbling block for so many of us. It is a faith that celebrates its prodigals, heretics and misfits, ‘people who have swum against the tide, thought outside the box or disobeyed the rules’ in order to be true to themselves. People like Jesus.



‘Jesus never wrote a book, never created a creed, never started a church and never intended to begin a new religion. He simply demonstrated the way of love - the golden rule in any religious tradition - and invited people to join him in that.’

*Dave Tomlinson
from ‘How to Be a Bad Christian’*



Spaceforsoul news...

Five years old in 2020...

Spaceforsoul celebrates its fifth birthday next year. Come and celebrate with us at our Soulspace meeting on **Sunday 2nd February 2020** at the Old Library, Muller Road, Eastville, Bristol, BS5 6XP from 10.00 - 12.30 pm.

You don't have to attend our regular Sunday morning Soulspace meetings to join us and you don't have to be a member of our community. Everyone who is interested in Spaceforsoul and our educational arm, the CSEA, is very welcome.

Dave Tomlinson becomes a patron for Spaceforsoul!

We are delighted to be able to announce that Dave Tomlinson has agreed to be a patron for Spaceforsoul. Our Spaceforsoul community has been shaped in part by Dave's ministry and writings and so it seems very fitting that we should ask him to take on the role of our patron as we approach our 5th birthday.

Dave has also agreed to come back to Bristol on **Saturday 25th April** next year to help us celebrate and will be doing another talk for us while he is with us.

Watch this space for further details!

Join our newsletter writing team

Are there things you want to tell us about - a good book, a helpful website, an inspiring blog, an unforgettable film or perhaps a particular quote that made you think? Do you have some thoughts or ideas you want to share with our wider community, a letter you want to write in response to one of our articles or a poem you have written that you think might speak to others?

It doesn't have to be a particular length or on a particular topic and you can remain anonymous if you want to. Just put pen to paper should you feel inspired and we will do the rest. And if you have any questions about contributing, just let us know.

Please send your contributions to us at spaceforsoulbristol@gmail.com We would love to hear from you. We publish our newsletters three times a year, usually in March, July and December, and will do our best to fit in all the contributions we receive. Publication is, however, at the discretion of our editor.



The latest CSEA news...



Centre for Spiritual Exploration and Accompaniment

In Search of Soul:

Exploring the spiritual journey

Our e-course programme

At the end of January 2020, the CSEA is shutting down its current e-course programme entitled 'In Search of Soul'. But that is not the end of this particular story. The material that has been made available through the programme has been very well received by those who have completed the three e-courses and so we have decided to make it more widely available and easily accessible by re-issuing it in what might be described as more of an e-book format.

From January 2020 onwards, each of the 16 chapters that make up the three existing e-courses will be available to purchase separately in pdf format so that you can choose to focus only on those topics that are of particular interest to you and to purchase chapters in any order and at any time. A full list of the available chapters will be available on the CSEA website at www.csea.org.uk by the end of January 2020 along with a brief description of their content.

Our spiritual exploration course

A group of ten people have just completed our one year part time modular course which has the same title and is based on the same material. This course has also been very well received and will be running again from **January to November 2021**. The 2021 course prospectus will be available in the New Year.

Watch this space for further details! If you have any queries, please feel free to contact us by email at any time at sfs.csea@gmail.com

Our next CSEA workshop

Moving Space for Soul

with dance movement psychotherapist, Sue Topalian

Date: Sunday 26th January 2020 10.00 am – 1.00 pm

Cost: £20

Deadline for bookings: **Saturday 18th January 2020**

Venue: The Old Library, Muller Road, Eastville

Flyers and booking forms are available from:
sfs.csea@gmail.com



Exploring spiritual practice

The path of spiritual accompaniment



For centuries, people of all faiths and spiritual traditions have been seeking spiritual guidance, mentoring or discipling from others within their own tradition. Early Christians, for example, might perhaps have sought out one of the Desert Fathers or Mothers, holy men and women known as Abbas and Ammas who lived as hermits, monks and nuns in the deserts of Egypt and had a reputation for their holiness, wisdom and closeness to God. Similarly, Ancient Hindus were encouraged to find their own personal spiritual guide or guru (a Sanskrit word meaning 'venerable') and aspiring Sufi mystics looked for support and guidance from a Sufi master or 'shaykh', one who was regarded as having reached the end of the Sufi mystical path.

Contemporary spiritual accompaniment is, however, a very different experience. What it can offer us is a safe, accepting and supportive space in which we can tell our sacred stories, explore our spiritual journeying and 'live the questions' that are meaningful to us. It is essentially a non-directive process. It is not about one person giving moral or spiritual advice, guidance or direction to the other. It is an offering of companionship from a fellow traveller, from someone who is willing to walk alongside us for a while as we seek to find and follow our own unique path to the Divine.

Increasingly, those who are offering spiritual accompaniment (also known as spiritual direction) are trained to work not only with people who are following a particular spiritual path, but also with people who may not yet have found their own way. Some are also trained counsellors or therapists and so bring to their work a particular understanding of the ways in which our psychological and spiritual journeys are closely interwoven and are willing to work 'in the overlap' between the two.

Particularly for those of us who may not have found a spiritual home within the walls of organised religion or are struggling on our own with aspects of our spiritual lives, this can be an invaluable resource. You do not have to adhere to a particular spiritual tradition or to be part of a spiritual community to benefit from spiritual accompaniment. Wherever you may be on your spiritual journey and whatever it is you are searching for, setting aside an hour or so every few weeks to attend to your spiritual self in this way can be a profoundly growthful experience.

Finding a spiritual accompanier

Finding a trained spiritual accompanier has not always been easy in the UK. In the past, it has often been a somewhat 'behind the scenes' ministry which has generally only been available to people 'in the know' within the various faith traditions such as priests, lay workers and monastics in institutional settings. Most of us have simply been unaware of its existence or have not considered it to be relevant for our own spiritual lives. Nowadays, however, spiritual accompaniment is gradually moving out of churches, mosques, synagogues and temples and becoming more widely available to people from all walks of life and all faith backgrounds or none. It has also become much easier to search for someone to work with. Nowadays, many more spiritual accompaniers and directors are setting up their own websites in order to reach a wider number of people so you can try searching online for spiritual accompaniment, direction or companionship in your area.

If you belong to a particular religious tradition, there are a number of organisations that hold lists of spiritual accompaniers which you can access online:

1. The Retreat Association can give you the contact details of your closest, local 'list holder' of spiritual directors. These exist in various counties across England. They are either ecumenical or affiliated with a particular Christian tradition such as Catholicism or the Church of England. Most welcome enquirers from all Christian traditions.

<http://www.retreats.org.uk/spiritualdirection.php>

2. The London Centre for Spiritual Direction publishes a UK wide directory of spiritual directors on its website. This lists not only those directors working out of the Christian tradition but also some from the Jewish tradition. It also lists directors who are prepared to offer spiritual direction by Skype, Facetime and email.

<https://www.lcsd.org.uk/directory>

3. Spiritual Directors International have a free 'Seek and Find Guide' for spiritual directors which covers many countries including the UK.

<https://www.sdiworld.org/find-a-spiritual-director/seek-and-find-guide>

Choosing the right person

Finding the right person to work with can feel a little daunting as there are many different approaches to spiritual accompaniment and it can be hard to know which approach is the right one for you at this point in your spiritual journey. The first step in the process is that of clarifying what you are looking for by asking yourself a number of questions:

Would you prefer to work with a male or female accompanier or is their gender irrelevant? Does it matter to you how old they are? Would you mind if your accompanier were older or younger than yourself?

Do you want your accompanier to be grounded in a particular spiritual tradition and if so, do you want them to share your own spiritual tradition? Do you want your accompanier to be a priest or a member of a religious order or would you prefer to meet with a lay person?

Are you looking for someone with a more formal, structured approach or one whose approach is more informal and client-led? Do you want an accompanier who makes a clear distinction between spiritual accompaniment and therapy or one who is prepared to work 'in the overlap' between the two?

Where possible, it is generally advisable to have an initial meeting with at least a couple of spiritual accompaniers before you make your final choice. An initial meeting should give you the opportunity to say something about yourself and what you are looking for from spiritual accompaniment at this point in your spiritual journey. It should also give you the opportunity to ask about the accompanier's spiritual background, training and experience, about how they see the process of spiritual accompaniment and about their approach. The meeting should also cover issues such as their code of practice and the degree of confidentiality they offer as well as such practicalities as the frequency and length of meetings and the fees they charge.

The most important thing in making your choice, however, is to trust your own 'gut sense' as to whether a particular relationship is a good fit for you and to have the courage to walk away from it if it is not. If you would like further advice around finding a spiritual accompanier, please feel free to contact us at sfs.csea@gmail.com. A member of our Steering Group is an experienced spiritual accompanier and would be happy to talk through with you how to set about finding the right person.

Resources for the journey...



Marcus Borg (2009) 'Reading the Bible Again for the First Time.' HarperOne

In this book, Borg explores how we can move towards a fully authentic contemporary understanding of the Bible by 'taking it seriously but not literally'. He argues that the conventional way of seeing the Bible's origin, authority, and interpretation is no longer persuasive to many people in our postmodern age and that we need a fresh way of encountering the Bible - what he calls a 'historical-mythological' approach to reading and interpreting Scripture.

Progressive Christianity.Org

Progressive Christianity 'is an open, intelligent and collaborative approach to the Christian tradition and the life and teachings of Jesus that creates a pathway into an authentic and relevant religious experience.'

It is a non-profit, internet-based organisation that provides a wide range of resources designed to help individuals, families, and



communities explore progressive Christian theology, spirituality and community life.

These include articles, book reviews, interviews, videos and alternative progressive liturgies, all of which can be accessed free online.



Brené Brown: articles and podcasts

<https://brenebrown.com/articles-and-podcasts-with-brene/>

A series of articles and podcasts by the American research professor and author of several best-selling books including 'The Gifts of Imperfection', 'Rising Strong' and 'Daring Greatly'.