

# Awakening

A Spaceforsoul publication

March 2020

## This storm will pass.

A very good friend of mine sent me a perfect gem of a book last Christmas. It sits permanently on my bedside table so that I can dip into it whenever I need to lift my spirit or nourish my soul. It is a book of few words and many pictures - 'places to get to in a sea of words' as the author, Charlie Mackesy puts it. It is simple and profound. It is funny and wise. It is, as the screenwriter, Richard Curtis describes it, 'A wonderful work of art and a wonderful window into the human heart.' And it is quite the most beautiful book that I have come across in a very long time.

In its pages you will meet the lonely boy in need of a friend, the cake-loving mole who wants to be less afraid, the wary fox who has known little kindness and the wise and gentle horse who knows a thing or two about life. It tells the story of their wanderings, of their springtime adventures, of their conversations, of the friendships that grow between them and of what they teach each other about life as they journey together.

Amongst other things, the boy learns that the reason we are here is to love and be loved. The mole learns to face his fears and that hugs are better than cake. The wary fox is changed by an act

of kindness and learns to trust again. And the horse discovers that it is alright to be fully himself.

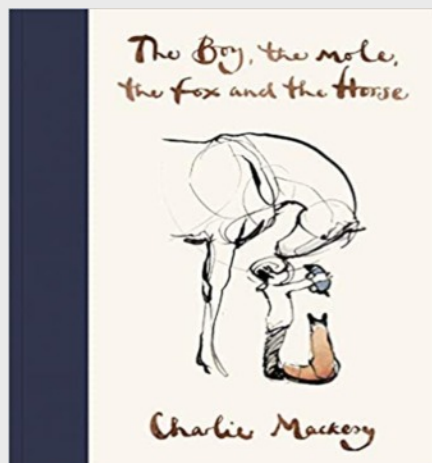
I have found myself returning to the book often over the last few weeks as I have wrestled from time to time with not being able to be with the people I love, with fearing for their safety and their future, with grieving for all that has been lost in the midst of the storm that engulfs us. And each time I open its pages, I find reason to hope, reason to be thankful and reason to trust that this storm too will pass

And when the world around me feels totally out of control, it reminds me that while all we may hear about is the pain, the fear and the darkness, there is still more Love and Light and Beauty in this world than we could ever imagine. It helps me to hold in my mind those people and things in my life that I love and so to take myself into the place of calm in the eye of the storm. This book is one of those things. I have the boy, the mole, the fox and the horse to walk with me as I travel this path and I am immensely grateful for that.

I leave the last word to the horse:

*'Everyone is a bit scared.... But we are less scared together.'*

Kaitlyn Steele



*'What do we do when our hearts hurt?' asked the boy. 'We wrap them with friendship, shared tears and time, till they wake hopeful and happy again.'*

~

*'We don't know about tomorrow,' said the horse, 'all we need to know is that we love each other.'*

~

*'Sometimes just getting up and carrying on is brave and magnificent.'*

Charlie Mackesy

## Progressive perspectives: Making sense of the Bible

Many of us come away from reading the Bible feeling bewildered, confused, sceptical, doubting or even repelled by some of what we have encountered in its pages. Indeed, what we read there sometimes leaves us unsure as to what to make of it all. Many of us have wrestled with what the Christian theologian, John Shelby Spong calls 'the terrible texts' of the Bible in his book entitled 'The Sins of Scripture'. Many of us have been appalled by what he refers to as 'the dark side' of the Bible and by the way in which particular biblical passages have been used over the centuries to justify war, slavery, oppression and discrimination against particular groups of people, including so-called 'heretical' Christians. Many of us have struggled to hold together the images of a wrathful, vengeful Old Testament God of judgement with those of a loving, forgiving New Testament Father God. Such struggles are not uncommon amongst Christians. And they are also common amongst people of other faiths as they engage with the sacred texts of their traditions.

Most of us will have been taught early on in our spiritual lives that the Bible is the divinely inspired, infallible word of God and cannot, therefore, be questioned or challenged. We are likely to have been taught a particular way of seeing and interpreting the Bible and to have been told that this is the 'right' way and the only way. We may also have been taught to distrust and dismiss our own reasoning, personal experience or inner spiritual authority when this appears to conflict in any way with the traditional interpretations of scripture that have been handed down to us. As a result, some of us may even have abandoned any form of engagement with the Bible at all.

In his book, 'Reading the Bible Again for the First Time' the progressive Christian theologian, Marcus Borg introduces us to a new way of thinking about the Bible. Rather than seeing it as the literal 'word of God' and

*'... everything written in the Bible was written to someone else for some other purpose in another culture, time and place that we have largely lost. So we are in the position always as interpreters... of being on our knees listening through a keyhole to an ancient conversation not intended for us.'*

*Robin Myers*



as being, therefore, of sacred origin, it views the Bible as a human product. It was written, he says, not for 21st century Christians, but for the ancient Hebrew and early Christian communities that produced it. It is in reality a set of historical documents written many centuries ago by fallible human beings in response to their experience of the Divine.

What makes the Bible sacred, he says, is not its origin, but its status. He points out that a particular text is sacred 'only because it is sacred *to a particular community*.' To speak of a particular text as having *a sacred status* indicates that it has come to be seen as sacred, and therefore authoritative, by those who belong to the community. Over time, a sacred text gradually becomes the most important collection of writings available to that community. It becomes what Borg calls 'a foundation document' upon which the religious identity and tradition of the community is built.

Borg points out that seeing the Bible in this way leads to a new way of thinking about the Bible's authority. The Bible's sacred status requires us to be in continuing dialogue with it. Its human origin means, however, that this ongoing dialogue must be a critical dialogue. We need to be able reach informed decisions as to which parts of the text should or should not be honoured and how it might best be interpreted and applied in the context of our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives. And in doing so, we need to be able to draw not only on tradition, but also on our experience and reasoning.

Embracing this way of thinking about the Bible changes everything. It acknowledges that the meaning of any particular passage is not 'fixed in

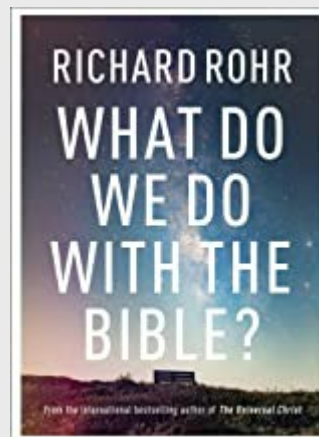
concrete' but is open to reinterpretation by every new generation. It reminds us that understanding the ancient historical contexts in which the Bible was written is crucial to making sense of it and that errors, omissions and additions will inevitably have occurred in the course of translating and transmitting the texts across the centuries.

A further complication arises from the fact that the process of myth-making has also impacted on the writing of the Bible. Borg points out that many biblical stories are best viewed as metaphors rather than as factual truths and that others are a combination of historical fact and myth. He uses the Christmas story to illustrate this. Contemporary historical Jesus scholarship teaches us that not all of the story is historically true. For example, it tells us that Mary was not a virgin; that the star of Bethlehem was not an astronomical event but a literary creation that draws on an ancient symbol pointing to Jesus as 'the light of the world'; that Jesus was probably born in Nazareth rather than in Bethlehem; and that the story of Herod the Great ordering the slaying of all male babies in Bethlehem never actually happened but was another literary creation which parallels the story of Moses' birth in the book of Exodus. We need, he argues, to be able to hear the Christmas story as a true story even though not all of it is historically true. The story, he says, is one of many ancient mythological stories of the conflict between good and evil, between light and darkness, between divine power and human power and the meaning they carry is far more important than their historical accuracy.

All of this opens our eyes to the very considerable difficulties we face in trying to interpret our sacred texts and to the enormous responsibility we bear when we do so. It gives us permission to think critically about the sacred texts of our tradition. Through learning to take the Bible seriously but not literally, we can enter into a new and much more rewarding relationship with it. Through engaging with progressive Christian writers such as Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong and with the work of other contemporary historical scholars, we can benefit from the knowledge and insights derived from their scholarship. And through embracing a more 'historical-metaphorical approach' to studying the Bible, we can discover layers of symbolism and meaning that we may not have been aware of before.

All of this has the potential to bring the Bible alive for us again and to show us that it still has relevance for our lives and can still carry meaning for us in this postmodern age in which we live.

## Some useful resources for those who want to dig deeper...



Richard Rohr (2019)

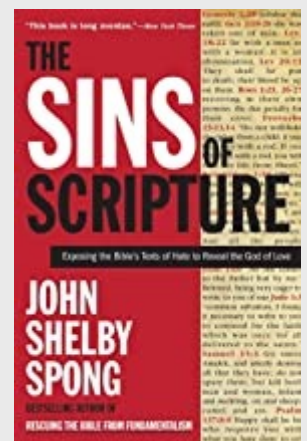
What Do We Do with the Bible ?

SPCK

John Shelby Spong (2009)

The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's texts of hate to reveal the God of love.

HarperOne



The Westar Institute

<https://www.westarinstitute.org/>

A organisation dedicated to fostering and communicating the results of cutting-edge scholarship on the history and evolution of the Christian tradition.

View the Westar Institute YouTube video called 'Westar on the Road' here :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbkvQcf6kJg>

## Progressive voices: Rob Bell

Rob Bell is an American writer, speaker and former pastor. The author of ten books, including the New York Times bestsellers 'What We Talk About When We Talk About God' and 'Love Wins', he also produces a very popular podcast called the RobCast. He has been profiled in the New Yorker. He has toured with Oprah Winfrey and in 2011 Time Magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. He also has a regular show at Largo, a comedy and music club in Los Angeles, where he lives with wife Kristen and their three children.

Bell grew up in an evangelical Christian family in Michigan. Sometime around his tenth birthday, he knelt down by his bed, with his parents by his side and invited Jesus into his heart. 'Everything I do', says Bell, 'it probably all flows out of something that's been there for as long as I can remember. Like, a deep-seated, sort of old-school Jesus belief.' After college, he trained at an evangelical Christian seminary. His first leadership role within the church was as a youth pastor and from there, he went on in his early thirties to start his own evangelical megachurch known as Mars Hill in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was so successful that he was hailed by one national newspaper as 'the next Billy Graham'.

And then, out of the blue, his evangelical Christian faith started to unravel. As a result of digging deeper into Biblical history and learning about the Jewish traditions that shaped Jesus' life and the competing agendas that shaped his message after his death, he discovered liberal theology. He started to doubt the infallibility of the Bible which in turn led him to doubt his faith altogether. He found himself in the unenviable position of leading a church while not even being sure that he was still a Christian. Eventually this faith crisis led him to leave both the church and his ministry as a pastor and while he eventually found his way through his crisis of faith, so far he has never turned back.



Bell is a progressive thinker who is not afraid to push up against theological boundaries, to question traditional doctrines and to challenge firmly held beliefs and assumptions - so much so that it has led him to be branded as 'the biggest heretic in America'. He has, for example, cast doubt on the idea of hell as a place of eternal punishment and has voiced support for more universalist teachings. He has argued for same sex marriage, for including women in leadership and for 'reading the Bible literately but not literally'.

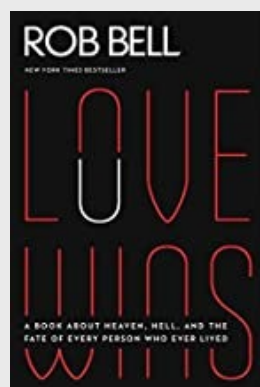
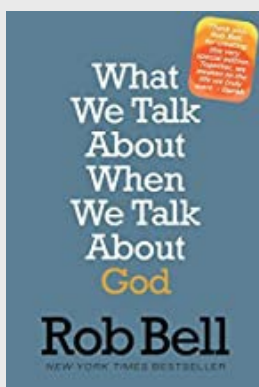
He is also on a mission to revolutionise the way we 'do church' and to find new ways of moving beyond more old-fashioned, traditional forms of worship. He has often talked of a growing demand for a different kind of church, one that can more readily keep pace with the rising tide of culture without losing sight of the heart and soul of the Christian faith.

What drives him is his deep desire to see ordinary people connect with God. He is in search of those who think they are non-religious but still sense what he calls 'the hum of reverence' within. For the moment, his sights are set beyond the walls of the church. He wants no more than to tell the Jesus story that spoke to him so powerfully as a child. 'My experience' he says, 'has been that when I do my best to tell that story, for some reason people often respond by saying, "I believe too."'

### Some Rob Bell quotes from 'Love Wins'...

*'The moment God is figured out with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God.'*

*Jesus 'didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain him, especially the one called 'Christianity'.*



# Exploring spiritual practice

## The spiritual practice of working with mandalas



A traditional Tibetan sand mandala

### What is a mandala?

A mandala is a sacred geometric figure. Tibetan Buddhists have described it as a form of integrated structure organised around a unifying centre. Traditionally, its shape was that of a square with four T-shaped gates containing a circle with a centrepoint as in the image of a Tibetan Buddhist monk creating a sand mandala above. However, mandalas now take a variety of shapes and forms. They may include images, words and recognisable spiritual symbols or they may be purely abstract. Almost always, however, they will include a circle with some form of focal point in the centre.

The word 'mandala' is often loosely translated as 'circle' and the circle is of course a powerful symbol in many religious traditions, conveying as it does ideas of wholeness and unity. The word comes, however, from the ancient, classical language of India known as Sanskrit which is still used in Hindu religious ceremonies and rituals and in some Buddhist practices. It is derived from the Sanskrit root 'manda' which means 'essence' plus 'a' meaning 'having' or 'containing'. Literally, therefore, it means 'to have possession of one's essence'.

### The use of mandalas

The use of mandalas is thought to have originated within Hinduism. Indeed, the word first appears in the Rig Veda – an ancient collection of sacred Sanskrit hymns thought to have been composed over two thousand years ago. Mandalas have, however, been found to be present throughout the history of mankind in many other cultures and mythologies across the world and this led the analytical psychologist, Carl Jung, to view the mandala as an archetypal or universal symbol of wholeness and integration. They are also present in the natural world and in space.

Mandalas are used in spiritual practice within a wide range of religious and spiritual traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American Indian spirituality and Taoism. As a form of meditative practice, we may, for example, be encouraged to draw, paint, colour or sculpt our own mandala. Alternatively, we may be invited to focus in a contemplative way on a particular mandala that we feel drawn to or that has meaning for us.

They are also used for a variety of different purposes - for example, to enable us to relax, de-stress and centre ourselves, to turn our attention to the inner journey towards wholeness, to take us into sacred space, to provide a focus for meditative practice or to induce trance-like or higher states of states of consciousness. They are often employed as a spiritual teaching tool and are seen by many as a potential source of the experience of oneness, of wisdom, of peace or of healing.

## Creating your own mandala

Create a sacred space for yourself where you will not be disturbed and can give your full attention to the work for a period of time. Choose a square piece of paper or card of any colour and gather together the other materials you will need. Use a compass (or something similar) to create a circle shape on the paper.

Alternatively, you could choose to sculpt your mandala or to use a variety of objects such as stones or shells or flowers to create the patterns. In this case, you might find it helpful to take a photograph of your mandala once it is completed.



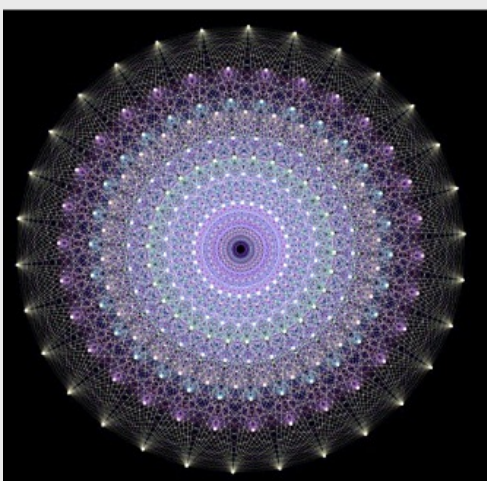
Before working on your mandala, spend a few minutes relaxing your body and centring your mind by taking deep, even breaths and focusing your awareness on your breathing. As you breathe out, let go of any tension you are holding in your body. As thoughts arise or you become aware of physical distractions, simply acknowledge them, let them go and re-focus on your breathing. This will help you to enter into the process slowly and meditatively with an attitude of receptivity and reverence.

When you feel ready, begin at the centre of the mandala and create whatever form suggests itself to you, working outwards from the centre. It could be a drawing, a painting or a collage. It could include symbols, images and words. Allow the images, shapes and colours of your mandala to 'choose' you rather than you choosing them. Trust your own 'gut instinct' and try not to analyse or criticise what is emerging.

Take as much time as you need over this process. It may take hours, days or even weeks for your mandala to emerge fully. Having completed it, you might find it helpful to spend some time quietly contemplating it. This is essentially a meditative practice of allowing your mind to 'enter into' your mandala.

### What might your mandala represent?

There are many different possibilities. It might, for example, represent aspects of your spiritual self; the shape of your spirituality; your spiritual journey; a particular spiritual experience you have had; or how you see or relate to the Divine. Trust your own inner voice and feel free to work with whatever is uppermost for you at this point in your spiritual life.



### Some useful resources:

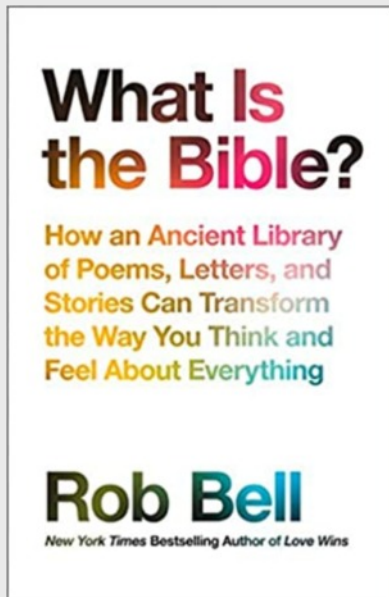
Lori Cunningham (2010) *The Mandala Book: Patterns of the universe.* Sterling Publishing

Susanne Fincher (2009) *The Mandala Workbook: A creative guide for self-exploration, balance, and wellbeing.* Shambhala

Madonna Gauding (2010) *The Meditation Experience.* Godsfield Publishing

Mandala templates or colouring books - there is a huge range of templates available free online.

## Resources for the journey



Rob Bell (2018) *What is the Bible? How an ancient library of poems, letters and stories can transform the way you think and feel about everything.* William Collins

Rob Bell argues that the Bible is more revelatory, revolutionary and relevant than we ever imagined but that we need to learn to look at it in a fresh, brand new way. He also addresses the concerns of all those who see the Bible as God's Word but are troubled by the ethical dilemmas, errors, and inconsistencies in Scripture. In so doing, he reaffirms the Bible's power to transform and inspire our lives today.

### The Robcast

A weekly podcast hosted by Rob Bell. You can subscribe to the podcast at Apple iTunes and you can also access hundreds of past episodes by visiting the podcast web page at...

<https://robbell.com/portfolio/robcast/>



### Meditation Oasis

Meditation Oasis offers solid affordable meditation apps that feature voice-guided meditations as well as relaxing nature sounds. These are based on universal principles that can be found in many spiritual traditions and practices and their meditation style is compatible with any culture, philosophy, beliefs or lifestyle.

The apps are very easy to use and there are bundles of up to eight different apps including Simply Being, Relax and Rest and Breathe and Relax.