

EXPLORING FAITH

Course Syllabus & Optional Texts Overview *Course devised and written by Revd Simon Tillotson*

Welcome to Exploring Faith, a five-week formation journey designed for seekers, sceptics, and long-time believers alike. This course challenges prevailing cultural caricatures of religion, constructs a robust framework for intellectual integrity, recovers ancient cosmic insights, and wrestles directly with the radical demands and deep wounds of human existence.

The course offers engagement with two contrasting yet complementary texts each week, balancing psychological, philosophical, historical, and narrative perspectives.

COURSE OUTLINE

Week	Theme	Optional Primary Readings
1	Faith Reborn: Deconstructing Caricatures and Coming Home	<i>God of Surprises</i> by Gerard W. Hughes <i>The Return of the Prodigal Son</i> by Henri Nouwen
2	Blind Faith? Reason, Doubt, and Intellectual Integrity	<i>The Story of Philosophy</i> by Bryan Magee <i>The Case for God</i> by Peter S. Williams
3	Faith in Whom or What? The Cosmic and Universal Christ	<i>Following the Celtic Way</i> by Ian Bradley <i>The Universal Christ</i> by Richard Rohr
4	Stepping Out in Faith: The Cost and Radical Risk of Discipleship	<i>Discipleship</i> by David Watson <i>Discipleship</i> by J. Heinrich Arnold
5	Growing in Faith: The Furnace of Suffering and the Problem of Evil	<i>The Thorn</i> by R.T. Kendall <i>The Shack</i> by Wm. Paul Young

WEEK 1 PARTICIPANT HANDOUT: FAITH REBORN

DECONSTRUCTING CARICATURES AND COMING HOME

"The 'God' whom many people reject is a caricature of God, a monster of our own making, who deserves to be rejected."

— Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises*

Welcome to Week 1. Tonight is about hitting the "factory reset" button on our spiritual assumptions. Whether we are sceptics who have kept God at arm's length, or long-time believers whose faith has grown cold and predictable, we all carry religious baggage.

This handout is designed for you to take home, read through at your own pace, reflect on the quotes, and use for your personal reflection this week.

PART 1: THE GODS WE MUST REJECT

Insights from *God of Surprises* by Gerard W. Hughes

Many people do not lose their faith because they hate truth; they lose it because their childhood version of religion failed to grow up with them. If you try to force an adult life with all its real grief, intellectual questions, and messy complexities into a ten-year-old's Sunday school theology, the fabric will rip. In *God of Surprises*, Jesuit priest Gerard W. Hughes argues that before true faith can be born, we must first have a funeral for the false "caricatures" of God that paralyse our spirits.

The Architecture of Our False Gods

We often build our images of God out of our early fears, parental authority figures, and rigid institutional conditioning. Hughes suggests that if we look closely at our inner spiritual lives, we will find we are often praying to a monster of our own creation rather than the living God. Here are the primary caricatures we must courageously dismantle:

- **The Celestial Policeman**

- **The Profile:** This God sits behind a heavenly speed camera, hidden in the bushes of life, waiting for you to make a mistake so He can flash the light and issue a cosmic fine. He is hyper-focused on your failures, tracking your thoughts, and logging your omissions.
- **The Impact:** Your spirituality will be defined by anxiety, hyper-vigilance, and chronic guilt. You will live defensively, treating life as a minefield to be crossed rather than an adventure to be lived. Conscience becomes a torturer rather than a guide.

- **The Meticulous Examiner**

- **The Profile:** This God is a cold, detached academic headteacher. He has set an incredibly difficult exam paper called "Life" and is constantly walking up and down the aisles checking your theological spelling and doctrinal purity.

- **The Impact:** If you don't hold the exact right dogmas, interpret scripture in the exact approved way, or say the exact right liturgical formulas, you fail. This breeds a rigid, legalistic faith that terrifies honest doubters and turns believers into self-righteous, fearful perfectionists.

- **The Grandfather in the Attic**

- **The Profile:** This God is old, senile, and historical. He's a kindly relic who belongs to a bygone era. He is nice to visit at Christmas, harvest festivals, or during traditional ceremonies, but he has no real power or relevance to the modern world.
- **The Impact:** He is tucked away safely in the attic of history. This image allows us to be "culturally religious" while remaining entirely functional atheists from Monday to Saturday, completely separating our spiritual lives from our daily choices, careers, and relationships.

- **The Cosmic Insurance Agent**

- **The Profile:** This is the God of transaction. We pay our "spiritual premiums" to Him through regular church attendance, financial giving, and being a decent citizen, and in return, He guarantees that nothing catastrophic will happen to us or our families.
- **The Impact:** This caricature completely shatters the moment tragedy strikes. When illness, bereavement, or sudden job loss hits, the person worshipping the Insurance Agent cries out, "Why is God doing this to me? I paid my dues!" It turns faith into a business contract rather than a relationship.

The Consequence: The "Inner Police State" and the Divided Self

Gerard Hughes points out that these caricatures do not just distort our view of heaven; they ruin our psychological and emotional health here on earth. When we serve a Policeman or an Examiner, we are forced to build an inner police state. We split ourselves into two distinct people:

1. **The Religious Mask:** The "good Christian" persona we present to the world and to our tables at church. This person uses holy language, nods along with sermons, and pretends to have no doubts, no anger, and no messy desires.
2. **The Real Self:** The hidden person beneath the surface who experiences deep doubts, burning anger, inner confusion, jealousy, and despair.

Because we believe the Celestial Policeman cannot tolerate the Real Self, we repress it, lock it in the basement, and post guards over it.

The Hughes Warning: *"When we suppress our real feelings because we think they are 'unchristian,' we inadvertently shut out the very voice of God. God cannot transform the person we are pretending to be; He can only meet us in our absolute reality."*

If you spend all your spiritual energy hiding your true thoughts and feelings from God, your spiritual life will eventually become a dry, suffocating chore, leading to profound spiritual paralysis.

The Shift: Meeting the God of Surprises

True faith is reborn the moment we realise that the "God" we have been running away from or trying to please does not actually exist. By rejecting these caricatures, you are not losing your faith; you are clearing away the toxic weeds so that genuine faith can take root.

The true God of the scriptures is the God of Surprises. He refuses to fit into our predictable, neat religious boxes. He breaks through our security systems and meets us precisely where we are least prepared for Him:

- **He is found in our weakness:** While the Examiner demands perfection, the God of Surprises reveals Himself in our failures, our brokenness, and our clay-jar humanity.
- **He is found in our honesty:** God prefers a genuine, angry cry of protest or a confession of total doubt over a polished, hollow prayer of false piety.
- **He is found in our desires:** Hughes emphasises that our deepest, most authentic human longings for love, beauty, justice, and peace are not secular distractions; they are the whispers of God drawing us home.

***Key Takeaway from Hughes:** "We find God not by escaping our humanity, but by entering into it more deeply... God is the God of surprises, who is often found in the very places we try to avoid: in our weakness, our confusion, and our deepest, most honest longings. Faith is the open-ended willingness to let God be who He is, and to be continually astonished by a goodness we could never earn or engineer."*

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PART 1

1. Which of the four false caricatures of God (Policeman, Examiner, Grandfather, Insurance Agent) do you catch yourself slipping back into most easily when life becomes difficult or chaotic?
2. Looking at the split between the "Religious Mask" and the "Real Self," why do you think we find it so threatening to reveal our raw, unfiltered doubts and feelings within religious communities?

PART 2: THE HOMECOMING OF THE HEART

Insights from The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri Nouwen

How do we move away from these rigid, toxic caricatures of God into a living, breathing, and life-changing relationship? In his spiritual masterpiece, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, theologian Henri Nouwen provides the roadmap.

Nouwen's life was transformed when he spent days staring at Rembrandt's massive oil painting of Jesus' most famous parable (Luke 15). He realised that this story is a profound psychological and spiritual map of the human condition.

Nouwen suggests that our hearts constantly alternate between three distinct spiritual postures:

1. The Younger Son: The Exhausted Wanderer

The younger son begins his journey with a radical act of rejection. Demanding your share of the inheritance before your parents died was the cultural and legal equivalent of telling your father, "I wish you were dead." The father shockingly grants his request, and the boy flees to a "distant country," where he throws himself into wild, unrestrained living until a famine hits, his money runs out, and he ends up starving in a pigpen.

- **The Search for Conditional Love:** The younger son's flight is driven by a deep human urge: the desire to find out if he is loved for what he does or what he earns. He leaves the unconditional love of home to seek the conditional love of the world.
- **The Modern "Distant Country":** The distant country is any state of mind where we try to build our identity, worth, and meaning completely apart from God. It is the exhausting, relentless pursuit of validation through career success, financial accumulation, physical appearance, or social status. It is the crushing weight of living under the modern mantra: "I am only what I achieve, I am only what I earn, and I am only what people think of me."
- **The Loss of Identity:** In Rembrandt's painting, the younger son is depicted from behind, kneeling before his father. His clothes are tattered, his head is completely shaven, and one of his sandals has fallen off his blistered foot. The ultimate tragedy of the distant country is not that the son lost his money, but that he lost his identity. He forgot he was a son.
- **The Homing Beacon of Exhaustion:** When the son decides to return home, his motivation is entirely unspiritual. He is simply starving, freezing, and utterly exhausted. Nouwen notes that many seekers arrive at the shores of faith not because they have solved every intellectual puzzle, but because they are spiritually running on empty. Their exhaustion becomes the homing beacon guiding them back to the Father.

2. The Elder Son: The Bitter Rule-Follower

The elder son never left the farm. He stayed home, woke up early every morning, worked the fields, and obeyed every single command his father ever gave. Yet, when he returns from the fields and hears music and dancing celebrating his reckless brother's return, he is consumed by an intense, burning rage and flatly refuses to join the party.

- **Wandering While Staying at Home:** It is entirely possible to be lost while standing right inside the father's house. The elder son's body was at home, but his heart was in a distant country of cold moralism, judgement, and isolation.
- **The "Slaving" Mindset:** When the father comes outside to entreat him, the elder son snaps: "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and you never even gave me a young goat to celebrate with my friends." He reveals that his years of obedience were not motivated by love or intimacy, but by a sense of joyless transaction. He viewed his father as a harsh master — a Meticulous Examiner — and saw himself as a slave trying to earn his keep.
- **The Inability to Joyfully Feast:** Because the elder son lives by the strict law of karma (you get exactly what you earn), the concept of unearned grace makes him furious. He looks at his broken brother and sees only a competitor who got away with bad behaviour. He distances himself from the family entirely, sneering to his father: "This son of yours" — refusing to even call him his brother.

The Warning for Believers: This is the acute danger for the regular churchgoer. It is terrifyingly easy to stay inside the institutional church, keep all the rules, and yet become completely trapped in an inner prison of self-righteousness, comparison, and hidden bitterness. If your faith feels like a dry, resentful obligation, you are currently standing outside the party with the elder son.

3. The Father: The Dual Embrace

At the centre of the story stands the Father, who completely subverts every cultural expectation of the ancient world. When he sees the younger son dragging his feet down the road, the Father does not wait on the porch with a lecture; he tucks up his robes and runs down the road to embrace him. Later, when the elder son throws his bitter tantrum, the Father steps out into the dark a second time to plead with him, saying, "My son, everything I have is yours."

- **The Secret of the Mismatched Hands:** As the Father bends over the broken younger son, Rembrandt depicts his hands resting on the son's back as completely different from one another:
 - **The Left Hand:** This hand is broad, strong, and deeply muscular, pressing firmly into the son's shoulder. This is a traditional masculine hand, designed to hold, steady, protect, and exert strength. It says: "You are safe now; I will secure your future."
 - **The Right Hand:** This hand is elegant, soft, with long, slender fingers resting gently on the son's back. It is a distinctly feminine hand. It does not grip or force; it caresses, comforts, and offers a mother's tender refuge.
- **The Ultimate Challenge: Becoming the Father:** Nouwen concludes his book with a radical twist: the spiritual journey does not end with us simply identifying as the forgiven younger son or the reconciled elder son. The ultimate goal of faith reborn is that we are called to become the Father. We are called to grow up spiritually until our own hands become the mismatched hands of God for a broken world.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PART 2

1. Nouwen suggests that personal exhaustion often becomes the "homing beacon" that guides seekers back to faith. Have you ever experienced a baseline crash that forced a reset of your spiritual path?
2. In what ways do you see the "Elder Son" mindset showing up as cold moralism, relational distancing, or quiet resentment inside institutional church circles today?
3. The text challenges us to ultimately become the Father with mismatched hands (protective strength and tender care). What does it look like practically to offer that type of dual embrace to someone in your immediate local community?

PART 3: RE-CODING THE CONCEPT OF THE DIVINE

Paradigm	The False Caricatures (Dismantled)	The Relational Reality (Recovered)
Foundational Stance	Surveillance, grading, scoring, legal enforcement.	Hospitality, running welcome, protective strength, tender care.
Human Status	Cosmic defendant, stressed examinee, contract holder.	Exhausted child, bitter worker, raw human self, future parent.
Core Motivation	Fear of fines, failure, legacy relevance, or loss of coverage.	Honesty in the basement, dropping masks, responding to deep desires.

PART 4: DIAGNOSTIC SELF-EXAMINATION PROMPTS

1. **Caricature Identification:** Review the profiles of the Celestial Policeman, Meticulous Examiner, Grandfather in the Attic, and Cosmic Insurance Agent. Which of these did your upbringing paint most vividly? How does its presence show up in your current moments of stress or failure?
2. **Locating the Mask:** Reflect on the split between the Religious Mask and the Real Self. What specific thoughts, doubts, feelings, or questions are you currently locking in your inner basement because you assume they are "unchristian"? What would it look like to bring them into absolute reality?
3. **The Sibling Audit:** Nouwen outlines the Exhausted Wanderer (Younger Son) and the Bitter Rule-Follower (Elder Son). If you strip away your external presentation, which form of fatigue is currently consuming you? Is it the exhaustion of striving for validation in a distant country, or the quiet bitterness of joyless duty at home?

PART 5: THE WEEKLY PRACTICE

The Two-Minute Unmasked Examen

Instead of trying to force a complex prayer life this week, practise this highly practical, two-minute exercise adapted from both authors:

- **Find Absolute Silence:** Dedicate two minutes each day to absolute quiet (while a kettle boils, during a commute, or right before sleep).
- **Drop the Mask:** Step completely out of your religious persona. Do not try to formulate holy phrases, use archaic vocabulary, or pretend you have your life or beliefs organised.
- **Name Your Reality:** Speak your exact current state to the dark. If you are running on empty, say it. If you are dynamic but sceptical, state it. If you are tracking hidden resentment, give it a name.

- **Visualise the Embrace:** Envision the mismatched hands of the Father resting directly upon your shoulders. Feel the left hand grounding and securing your frame; feel the right hand resting lightly, offering tender comfort and absolute sanctuary.
- **Extend the Invitation:** Breathe deeply and offer this simple internal phrase: "God of surprises, if you are truly there, step past my religious baggage this week. Surprise me."