

# *The Re-Imaging of Christianity*

## *Progressive Christianity*

### *A Secular Response*

Lecture  
for  
Atheist Society  
Melbourne, Australia

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8 September 2009

*There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

*If equal affection cannot be,  
Let the more loving one be me.*

W. H. Auden "The More Loving One"  
quoted by Karen Armstrong

*Whoever said money can't buy happiness simply didn't know where to go shopping.*

Bo Derek, American actress

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## Introduction

Tonight's presentation is about comparing two distinct versions of a Christian religious worldview within a backdrop of today's secular society. They should be considered as two separate positions on a broad spectrum of Christian beliefs and practices. *Traditional (or Conservative)* Christianity defines religious faith and salvation in terms of believing clearly-defined church doctrines. Faith is equated with acceptance. *Progressive (or Liberal)* Christians emphasise religious experiences from Christian practices over the acceptance of formal church doctrines and faith is seen as trust.

## Traditional Christianity

### *Introduction*

Traditional Christianity has been the public face of Christianity for the last few hundred years. It is dominant if not universal in countries of South America, Africa and southern Asia and the Orthodox Christianities of Eastern Europe, Russia and former Russian republics. Even in western countries like Australia, New Zealand, Western Europe and the US, Traditional Christianity forms a significant part of Christian practice.

### *Nature of God*

The **God** of Traditional Christianity is personalised as an ultimate being without peer, existing "out there" beyond our everyday senses. God is typically in a male leadership role as a father, master, king, law-maker and law-giver as well as judge and punisher with human-style feelings, reactions, knowledge and intentions, prescribed to an infinite degree including moral perfection. We, atheists, enjoy referring to this type of god derisively as "sky-god" to emphasise its simplistic conception.

### *Significance of Jesus*

Of course, Christianity had an additional problem of integrating **Jesus** within the monotheistic tradition of Judaism. On one hand the followers of Jesus wanted to be and, probably, needed to be part of Judaism, a long-established and respected religion. As well as being part of their traditions, Judaism helped to maintain historical credibility for the Christian followers. Let us not forget that, unlike today, tradition was highly prized in the ancient world while innovation was treated with great suspicion. On the other hand, Christians needed to explain the centrality of Jesus and his untimely execution. Somehow they wanted to see Jesus as *fully human* – how else could he suffer for us through his death? And he had to be *fully divine* – Jesus was the Messiah and the only son of God. Resolving Jesus both as human and as God simultaneously, while retaining the Jewish God as the father led to years of struggles, disputes and fighting until a series of councils starting at Nicaea in 325 CE provided the orthodoxy necessary to explain the many contradictions and gave us a triune God.

Here are some quotations exemplifying a traditional perspective of God. The first is wonderful quotation from the *1863 Brown's Dictionary of the Holy Bible*:

*God, properly denotes, the only one Being of infinite perfection. ...We cannot seriously consider the nature of our own soul and body, the existence of things around us, or the occurrence of events; we cannot attend to the workings of our mind, the dictates of our conscience concerning good and evil,*

*and how it accuses or excuses us with respect to our conduct; we cannot consider the universal harmony of all nations, in acknowledging a Supreme Being, or superior beings, without being persuaded of some self-existent, and absolutely eternal, almighty, benevolent, but wise and just Being, who hath created, and doth support and govern all things.*

And more recently Gerald Bay describes the relationship between man and God (Bay, 2006.

*Human beings form a kind of bridge between the spiritual and the material dimensions of creation because we are the only creatures who have a natural link with both of them. In the material dimension we are very much like the animals and our life cycle is similar to theirs. We are born, we reproduce, we eat food in order to survive and in the end we die, just as animals do. But in spite of these similarities, human beings are not animals. Unlike them, we also have a spiritual dimension, which the Bible describes as the 'image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27).*

And so, this is the supernatural God that almost instinctively comes to mind in Western society when asked, *do you believe in God?*

## **Status of the Bible**

### **Attitude towards Doctrine**

Traditional Christianity also emphasises the acceptance of and the belief in religious **doctrine**, Christian Bible, creeds and church teachings. Even though many would be familiar with the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, here is an early creed from Ignatius around 105 CE:

*Therefore, stop your ears when anyone speaks to you contrary to Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate. He was truly crucified and died – in the sight of beings in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father raising Him to life – in the manner as His Father will also raise us up, we who believe in Him by Christ Jesus. (Bercot, 1998 p. 181)*

Compared to other religions, Christianity is a very “bookish” religion. Even from the early days there has been a well-established practice of Christian Apologetics, the rational defence of the faith. Justin Martyr, Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have all written apologies, defending Christianity against opposition. C.S. Lewis of Nardian fame is a more contemporary example.

### **Role of Faith**

So in this context what is faith? **Faith** for Traditional Christianity is based on the acceptance of the beliefs as part of acceptance of Jesus. This means faith is equated to the willingness and readiness to accept certain doctrines and beliefs, even if they contradict everyday experience. It is not surprising that critics characterise religious “faith” as *belief without evidence*.

Here are some interesting faith quotations.

*Faith is something superior to knowledge and is its criterion. Conjecture, which is only a feeble supposition, is a counterfeit faith. Clement of Alexandria (195 CE).*

*Faith means abandoning all trust in one's own resources. Faith means casting oneself unreservedly on the mercy of God. Faith means laying hold on the promises of Christ in God, relying entirely on the*

*finished work of Christ for salvation, and on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God for daily strength. Faith implies complete reliance on God and full obedience to God.* (New Bible Dictionary, 1996 p.360)

### **Interpreting the Bible**

Regardless of denomination the Christian Bible is central to Christianity. The traditional view sees the Bible as either the divine word of God, similar to official Islamic doctrine, or, alternatively, written by authors who were divinely-inspired. Both involve a literalistic interpretation of the Bible as a historically factual document. Marcus Borg (2003, p.8) characterises these literal understandings as ranging from hard to soft. *Hard* interpretation sees the Bible as the inerrant word of God. They often see the Earth, all living things and humans were created by God some 6000 years ago. Not surprising they tend oppose any naturalistic explanations that contradict the Bible stories like the theories of evolution. *Soft* interpretations, on the other hand, take a slightly more metaphorical view of scriptures. For example, they are likely to see Genesis stories as Israel's aetiology rather than the literal origins of our Earth. But even soft literalists accept Christianity's most important biblical stories as fact - the virgin birth, healing and food-shortage miracles and Jesus' physical resurrection.

### ***Being a Traditional Christian and Responses to Others***

Another common characteristic of Traditional Christianity is their constant **living in judgement**. In Traditional Christianity all people are born "fallen", innately sinful, for which they need to seek forgiveness throughout their lives, to receive God's grace. Theologies vary as to whether grace is given freely or needs to be earned. Christian lives are driven to achieving the unattainable goal of perfection. Ultimately there will be a judgement after physical death where God will deliver an eternal reward or punishment. Many consider heaven and hell real places.

Furthermore morality comes from God and without God there would be total nihilism, no basis for good and bad moral behaviour. We would revert to the "law of the jungle". Morality depends on God in three ways. Firstly, God defines the concepts of right and wrong, without which we would be unaware of the difference. Secondly, God provides moral guidance through scriptures and church teachings. And, finally, God gives us motivation to be moral. Many Christians believe that evil is something that exists in reality and not just a word for harmful human behaviour.

### **Exclusivity**

Christian **exclusivity** of salvation has been an established belief. Other religious people and non-believers would be damned. A slightly softer version, inclusiveness, still considers Jesus to be God's only revelation to humanity, though his salvation works through other religions as well. Deniers of Jesus would be damned as usual.

Furthermore Christianity has been an aggressively proselytizing religion with missionaries being an important part of the Christian movement, even from the earliest days of Saint Paul. Tom Frame, Anglican Priest and professor of Theology who conducted the Bali bombing service in Canberra is not coy when he says:

*Christianity is a proactive religion; Christ calls his followers to make disciples of all nations; the churches are committed to a permanent recruiting drive. Christians want to promote their faith and share its blessings.* (Frame, 2009 p. 300)

## ***Problems for Traditional Christianity***

So what are the problems for Traditional Christianity in our twenty-first century secular society?

Mostly it is credibility and irrelevance, especially with young people. Firstly, unlike earlier societies we use secular, empirically-based knowledge to explain much of our world, seeking explanations from physical causes and not supernatural dogmas. Secondly, most people reject a hierarchical model of power and reverence. The days of “father knows best” and “divined to rule” are long gone. Thirdly, despite some vague deference to the books of the Christian Bible, most people today cannot take seriously that they tell many, if any, historical facts. And, finally, there is the problem of suffering or evil. Despite Christian theodicies, people cannot reconcile the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving, morally perfect Christian God with the on-going presence of natural and human-caused pain and suffering. The innocent, the good and the bad all seem to prosper and suffer equally.

## **Progressive Christianity**

### ***Introduction***

Progressive Christianity is a response by many theologians, scholars and laypeople who are unable to reconcile the doctrine of Traditional Christianity with today’s understanding of the world.

My survey comes from the writings, lectures and sermons of key figures in this broad-based essentially Protestant Progressive Christianity movement as well as referring to an affirmation of faith, written in November 2008, by the *Centre for Progressive Religious Thought* in Canberra. It provides a useful, local framework to survey the ideas of progressive Christians.

Unlike Traditional Christianity Progressive Christianity emphasises personal experience over acceptance of doctrine. By rejecting the authority of Christian doctrines and church teachings, progressives make their understandings of God, Jesus and the Bible more personal and less institutional.

### ***Nature of God***

**God** is portrayed as an all-inclusive, pervasive conscious essence, undetectable by any physical means and unable of being cast with human-styled characteristics. To reinforce its ineffable nature progressive Christians use terms like “the sacred”, the “more” (James 1982 p. 511), “is-ness”, “the spirit”, “Spirit of Life” and “God-presence” to refer to God. They prefer the roles of “lover”, one who gives and receives love, and “illuminator” (my term) as one who lights a new reality. Generally, though, progressive Christians believe that God exists distinctly from our physical world and therefore made of different “stuff”.

An affirmation of faith by the *Centre for Progressive Religious Thought* sees God as the following:

*We affirm there is a presentness in the midst of our lives, sensed as both within and beyond ourselves (my emphasis), which can transform our experiences of this earth and each other. Various imaginative ideas have been used to describe this presentness: ‘God’, ‘sacred’, ‘love’, ‘Spirit of Life’. We recognise all attempts at understanding and attributing meaning are shaped by prevailing thoughts and culture. Ultimately our response can only be as awe-inspiring mystery beyond the limits of our ability to understand our world and ourselves.*

The affirmation talks about “presentness” within us and, more importantly, “beyond ourselves”. They acknowledge that our ideas of this presentness are a product from individual cultural settings and this presentness is actually beyond our understanding.

Many progressive writers like to align their thinking with *panentheism*, literally “all-in-God-ism”, a term coined by German philosopher Karl Krause, 1781-1832, to combine the single entity of classical theism with the concept of pervasiveness of pantheism. The main idea is that God is everything and, implicitly, everywhere and the universe is actually part of God. So Panentheism emphasises the immanence qualities of God while still retaining its transcendental nature.

Finally, I struggle to understand how we have an engaging two-way loving relationship with a God beyond our understanding. Most human models of loving are with living beings – other people or conscious animals. Even with animals we tend to anthropomorphise the relationship to make them more familiar. Perhaps it is analogous to the love for one’s country. Or, is it, in reality, their way of describing an overwhelming feeling of universal acceptance and love? Christians may argue that analysing this relationship is missing the point and should be accepted as a “mystery”, a common aspect of religious worldviews.

## **Significance of Jesus**

*We honour the one called Jesus, a first century Galilean Jewish sage, nurtured by his religious tradition. A visionary and wisdom teacher, he invited others through distinctive oral sayings and parables about integrity, justice, and inclusiveness, and an open table fellowship, to adopt and trust a re-imagined vision of the ‘sacred’, of one’s neighbour, of life. As we too share in this vision, we affirm the significance of his life and teachings, while claiming to be ‘followers of Jesus.’*

(The Canberra Affirmation)

It is worth noting that there is no claim about being either God or the son of God. Integrating the traditional centrality of **Jesus** – essential to any form of Christianity - within a progressive and ineffable understanding of God seems complicated and, perhaps, problematic.

On one hand progressive Christians accept that little can be confirmed about the historical Jesus – itinerant Jewish preacher, lived in the early first century Palestine and executed by Roman authorities – remarkably little considering the momentous claims of the scriptures. Progressive Christians also, in the main, reject the supernatural claims about Jesus – virgin birth, miracles, and bodily resurrections. A popular approach is to disassociate the implausible supernatural claims from Christian practice. For example, Marcus Borg in books like *The Heart of Christianity* and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* speaks of a pre-Easter Jesus and a post-Easter Jesus, perhaps the latter more correctly thought of as the Christ of Christianity, as two separate understandings of Jesus.

The pre-Easter Jesus refers to the Jesus of historical research, of which very little can be established, as mentioned previously. It should be noted that many biblical scholars have attempted to authenticate stories and sayings of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels by historical and literary methods. The post-Easter Jesus is the one of faith where Christians assign theological trappings without necessarily any historical support. Today Progressive Christians attempt to apply metaphorical interpretations for the supernatural stories. This seems problematic with our limited knowledge of the authors’ historical and cultural settings. Progressive Christian writers regularly

stress not seeking historical facts but, instead, trusting myths and metaphors to provide greater truths. Marcus Borg says this very cleverly with "...metaphors can be profoundly true, even though they are not literally true. Metaphor is poetry plus, not factuality minus." (Borg 2002, p. 41)

So Progressive Christians typically deny the factuality of Jesus' physical resurrection after death, but seek to derive some metaphorical meaning. They can keep this foundational Christian story as a metaphor for personal death and re-birth without modern-day credibility problems. Most non-believers would see this as "too tricky by half".

## **Status of the Bible**

*"We receive the Hebrew and Christian scriptures known as the Bible, as a collection of human documents rich in historical memory and religious interpretation, which describe attempts to address and respond to the 'sacred'. It forms an indispensable part of our tradition and personal journeys. We claim the right and responsibility to question and interpret its texts, empowered by critical biblical scholarship as well as from our own life experiences. We accept that other sources – stories, poems and songs – imaginative pictures of human life both modern and ancient, can nurture us and others, in a celebration of the 'sacred' in life."*

(The Canberra Affirmation)

Notice that the Bible is not claimed as the word of God, directly or indirectly, but as the product of human authorship. Also note that other documents are considered valid sources for Christian spirituality along side the Bible.

## **Bible**

For many, though, the Christian Bible is still central for Progressive Christianity. In fact all writers suggest using the Bible as an important metaphorical source of faith while ignoring its traditional claim to historicity. Crossan and Watts (1996 P. 121) are blunt with their historical assessment of the resurrection story:

*In a nutshell, these are my conclusions: First, the Easter story is not about the events of a single day, but reflects the struggle of Jesus' followers over a period of months and years to make sense of both his death and their continuing experience of empowerment by him. Second, stories of the resurrected Jesus appearing to various people are not really about "visions" at all, but literary fiction prompted by struggles over leadership in the early church. Third, resurrection is one – but only one – of the metaphors used to express the sense of Jesus' continuing presence with his followers and friends.*

So they deny the historical accuracy of the Bible stories in any literal sense. Marcus Borg advocates considering the Bible in three ways: *historical* - human product of two ancient communities, expressing their witness to God; *metaphorical* - understanding the meaning behind the literal language, like comparing love to a red rose; and *sacramental* – acting as a mediator or conduit between a follower and the sacred.

## **Doctrine**

*As progressive Christians in the 21st century, we are uncomfortable with rigid statements of belief, as we recognise our understandings are shaped by life experiences within cultural*

*and environmental contexts. Yet, there are some common understandings which continue to shape our lives, both individually and in community with others.*

(The Canberra Affirmation)

Progressive Christianity emphasises personal experience over believing in doctrine. Progressive writers argue that they are actually returning to the roots of Christianity by emphasising experience and practice over belief in specific doctrines. Karen Armstrong in an interview with Rev Alan Jones, Dean Grace Episcopal Cathedral, on *Fora TV* February 2008, blamed modernity for our demand that truth comes from facts and evidence. Christians reacted with making claiming historical factuality of the Bible stories. Armstrong further suggests that followers should ignore the doctrine; act as Christians; and then care about beliefs later.

### ***Being a Progressive Christian***

*We acknowledge that a transformative path of inclusion and integrity involves living responsible and compassionate lives in community with others.*

(The Canberra Affirmation)

Progressive writers talk of compassion and personal transformation rather than obedience and servitude.

Spong famously called for a “New Reformation” by posting his challenges to Traditional Christianity in the spirit of Luther’s *95 Theses*. Here are some to give a flavour of his complaints:

*3. The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post- Darwinian nonsense.*

*9. There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in Scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behavior for all time.*

*11. The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behavior-control mentality of reward and punishment. The church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behavior.*

Similarly, Rev. Francis Macnab, St Michaels’ Uniting Church, Melbourne, described the old religion as encouraging people to be “dependent neurotics”. His new faith requires a revolution in morality where issues are faced with personal consciences and no need for God. Macnab replaces these old commandments with a set of ten new commandments emphasising harmonious living with self, others, other living things and the environment. Here are some to give a sense of his approach:

*Commandment 1: Believe in a Good Presence in your life. Call that Good Presence: God, G-D - and follow that Good presence so that you live life fully - tolerantly, collaboratively, generously and with dignity.*

*Commandment 3: Take care of your home, your environments, your Planet and its vital resources for the life and health of people in all the world.*

*Commandment 5: Help people develop their potential and become as fully functioning human beings as is possible from birth, through traumas and triumph to the end of their days.*

Macnab like other progressive Christians rejects the idea that we are living under universal judgement leading to an eternal punishment or reward and that morality should be human-based. These progressive statements assist those who seek to move away from the oppressive Christian models of servitudes. Most progressive Christians also see Jesus as a moral exemplar, setting an example for all of us. This is a commonly accepted view in society. However before seeing that as obvious, I suggest you read Bertrand Russell's famous critique of Jesus' Gospel portrayal in *Why I Am Not A Christian* (Russell, 1927)

## Final Comments

Whether one sees Progressive Christianity as regaining its mystical roots or simply shedding unpalatable doctrine depends on your point of view. Its social aims are laudable: equitable social justice; care for the disadvantaged and marginalised; human-based morality; concerned about concentration of wealth and power; and responsible environmental management. These are similar to those of secular humanism. I could imagine a progressive Christian and a secular humanist serving equally well on a hospital ethics committee or an environmental panel.

However, and this is a big however, progressive Christians have effectively denuded Christianity much of its theology and doctrine, and potentially its claim to authority. They may have jettisoned Christianity's unique *raison d'être*, their justification for existence. God is now a pervasive goodness; Jesus becomes a first century Galilean sage rejected in his own time; and the sacred texts are ancient sources to access this goodness. The Bible no longer holds a unique position of authority with the other literary and artistic sources providing genuine spiritual alternatives.

Why bother with any form of Christianity? Today's spiritual seekers are likely to continue leading comfortable secular lives with occasional new-age spirituality, no need for an ancient Jesus or Christian Bible. Progressive Christianity targets liberal middle-class disaffected Christians who want to retain their faith.

Is there a future for Progressive Christianity? According to Tom Frame, "Left-leaning, cause-driven, liberal Protestant churches that lack doctrinal rigour and are preoccupied with the promotion of social justice and cultural inclusion will be the first to go" (Frame, 2009 p.299). The future looks limited for Progressive Christianity in secular Australia as its target market shrinks. Traditional churches continue to dominate the religious airwaves with their loud, rearguard attacks on our secular society and its lack of morals, without God's moral compass.

Unfortunately, the saner and more reasoned voices of progressive Christians will go largely unnoticed. And that is a real pity for all of us!

Alex McCullie © 2009

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