

Seminary of the 3rd Age

2023

*Crossing boundaries
and
expanding horizons*

AUGUST 3rd 7pm **JASON JOHN - OUR PLACE IN CREATION**
First Nations Wisdom in Caring for Creation

AUGUST 10th 7pm **MAX HOWLAND**
The Relevance of Prayer in Public Worship - How Can
Preachers Make it Matter?

AUGUST 17th 7pm **MAX HOWLAND**
The Relevance of Ancient Creeds - Are They Still Credible?

AUGUST 24th 7pm **PANEL FORUM**
The Centrality and Relevance of Inclusivity

AUGUST 31st 7pm **PETER McDONALD**
What Do We Learn From Our Service Agencies?

Video podcasts of Sem3A presentations can be found on the ELC website at
<https://effectiveliving.ucasa.org.au/podcasts/>

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SEMINARY OF THE 3RD AGE

An invitation to attend the August 2023 Series

Crossing Boundaries and Expanding Horizons

This year's program features a partnership with the SA Uniting Church's *Environmental Action Group* in providing a forum for their challenging task of engaging the wider church in creation care. The theme of this module is *Our Place in Creation*, which will be presented in four sessions on the first Thursday evening in March, May, August, and October.

August 3rd Jason John

First Nations Wisdom in Caring for Creation

August 10th Max Howland

The Relevance of Prayer in Public Worship - How Can Preachers Make it Matter?

August 17th Max Howland

The Relevance of Ancient Creeds - Are they still Credible?

August 24th Panel Forum

The Centrality and Relevance of Inclusivity

August 31st Peter McDonald

What do We Learn from Our Service Agencies?

- \$15 each session, \$12 concession, with a 30% discount on general admission for Friends of ELC, or a 25% discount on general admission when booking all four sessions.
- We would appreciate you registering prior to the event, via the HUMANITIX website at <https://www.humanitix.com/au> or via the [Seminary of the 3rd Age web page](#) and click on the booking links. When registering for the first session you can also book for all four sessions.
- Alternatively, you may contact the ELC office on (08) 8271 0329 during its opening hours to make a payment by credit card. The office is open from 10am to 2pm, Tuesday to Friday. If you telephone outside of these hours, please leave a message clearly indicating which session(s) you will attend. Another option is to pay by credit card on the night.

For more information about topics and presenters please visit the Seminary web-page

If you were unable to attend our May series, *First Nations Spirituality*, you can catch up on the three presentations via the videos page on the Effective Living Centre website: <https://effectiveliving.ucasa.org.au/podcasts/>

CHRISTIAN POLITICS – THE RADICAL CENTRE?

Radical centrism is a political concept that arose in the West in the late 20th century, calling for “realism and pragmatism” in the search for solutions to the problems of democratic polity, “not just idealism and emotion” (to quote the Wikipedia article on the topic). In Australia in recent times Noel Pearson has been an eloquent proponent, in the UK former liberal leader Nick Clegg, in the US Teddy Roosevelt and JFK were eminent practitioners back in the day. Philosophically it has its roots in early 20th century American Pragmatism, especially the towering figure of John Dewey.

I’m name dropping! The question is, can we find a radical centre in the radically polarised Christian politics of the present moment. “Idealism and emotion”? Yes, it sounds just like how conservative Christians might describe (us) progressives—as politically motivated ideologues, in love with the sound of their own ideas, long since having lost touch with the truth of scripture - and how (we) progressive Christians might describe conservatives—as emotionally driven, happy-clappy, reactionary literalists. And ne’er the twain shall meet.

What divides us, apart from worship style and political stripe? Well, it’s that deadly three-letter word, s-i-n, I think. Conservatives, on one hand, view sin as primarily an individual matter, so that what matters mission-wise is getting as many people as possible (individually) saved before it’s too late—the world can go to pot (and probably will) for all we care! Progressives, on the other hand view sin as primarily a collective, cultural, social, political thing—the words usually used, in fact, are not “sin” at all (a terrible word to be avoided at all costs), but injustice, oppression, discrimination, patriarchy, capitalism and so on.

The hot button issue of division for some time has been LGBTQ+. For conservatives these proliferating categories are all forms of individual sin, so by all means exercise kindness and compassion, but don’t support or encourage them in their sinfulness in any way. For progressives what is sinful is not individual LGBTQ+ people, but the terrible discrimination they suffer at the hands of the unjust system; so, by all means do support and encourage them, while at the same time focussing your efforts on advocating and agitating for justice and an end to discrimination.

Conservatives and progressives are right now about to divide along the same party lines on the issue of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. How predictable! But can we, for once, instead, find a bridge across the divide?

A radical centre for Christian politics, in other words? Well, is sin in fact primarily individual, or is it primarily collective? Both, of course! The Garden story depicts it beautifully. Eve and Adam are individuals—no surprises there 😊—and who is the serpent other than the personification (well, snake equivalent thereof) of collective, cultural, social sin—the culture of sin we are all innocently born into? Now, Adam and Eve weren’t born with sin, so sin must be collective first before it is individual. But hang on, how could culture ever get sinful without individuals sinning in the first place? Go figure!

The loving couple are not our primordial ancestors, by the way—obviously; we evolved - rather a figure of us all, each individual one of us, on the road from innocent infancy to responsible adulthood. The key to the riddle - What came first, individual sin or collective sin?- is that we humans are essentially relational - in relation with others and with the world. Sin is therefore never solely individual. Never ever. We sin, individually, and are responsible for it, ourselves; but our sin is always against relationships of one sort or other, so it goes out, simultaneously, into the world to contribute to the sin collective; and thence it feeds back, in a loop, back to us again, individually sinning.

NEWSLETTER JULY 2023

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The radical centre of Christian politics is the amazing thing that is always the antidote to sin, individual or collective, namely g-r-a-c-e. What else could it be? Both conservative and progressive approaches, taken separately, are always in danger of becoming what are called “works programs”- trying to save either yourself, or the world, by your own works. Either way we tend to cut ourselves off, individually, from the essential source of grace, which is always outside us. Outside us both individually, and collectively - way outside even of our culture, any culture.

Thus, the conservative side fails to avail itself of the flow of grace that can come to individuals through the redemption and transformation of institutions, cultural practices, legal, political and economic structures, and so on. And the progressive side fails to tap into the amazing grace individuals open themselves up to when they acknowledge they are perpetrators as well as victims, and take responsibility for their lives by placing themselves (paradoxically) in the hands of a “higher power”.

You’ve wondered why conservative churches experience “churn”- people flooding in the front door on an emotional high, then being sucked out the back door just as fast by the seductive, non-judgemental culture outside - and progressive churches experience despairing burn out or slow and steady faith dissipation. Wonder no longer.

Realism and pragmatism. There is nothing more real and pragmatic than grace, more intangibly tangible. What about the Indigenous Voice? Both sides are right. Yes, the solution is individual responsibility, an end to welfare dependency, an embracing of their rightful place alongside us in this great nation. Yes, the solution is transformation of social institutions and especially of our constitution built on the un-grace of dispossession and *terra nullius*. And yes, we can, and do need to have both. Grace says both.

Back to the radical centre. What would Jesus do? Conservatives are the Pharisees of the present day, and so are (we) progressives - when we line up against each other in our fixed positions, our opposing trenches. Grace is always the amazing opportunity of the moment that Jesus offers us, for forgiveness, reconciliation, transformation; never a judgement for us to beat each other over the head with. What did Jesus, that wily conservative/progressive, do? Well, just read John 8:1-11 again. Correct me if I’m wrong, but he used his opposition to the social sin of stoning adulterers - grace to the people and to the system - to deliver grace to the woman, to save her from her individual sin. “Go and sin no more”, he said. It’s the pattern that’s important. The radical centre? Yeah, I think Jesus nailed it.

Fergus McGinley June 2023



THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

A presentation given by Jonathan Barker at a forum organised by the South Australian Anthroposophical Society on 19th March 2023

I frame my thoughts around five key words. The first is **GLOBALITY**. Whatever the future holds, it has to recognise the reality of globality and the imperative of seeing ourselves as citizens above all else as citizens of the globe. There will be no future for humanity and all living things unless the peoples of the earth counter the existential threat posed by human induced warming of the planet.

At the personal level, it means reimagining ourselves as all belonging to the one human race, not identifying primarily by nation, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture or religion. "I am a citizen of the planet earth above all else."

How can such a change in consciousness take place? As always, only by being so impacted by the ravages of the reality of climate change and loss of life, that people will sense in their inner being that they have to transcend their present parochialism. Yes, cognitive dissonance will still infect a minority, but the majority will claim a new identity. Humanity's future requires us to transcend our parochialism.

The second word is **HYBRIDITY** which leads to the imperative of accepting diverse ethnicities which proliferate around the world. Professor James Noel, an African American scholar, with whom I was studying in San Francisco, in the late 90's concluded his last collegium by saying nothing. Instead, he wrote one word on the white board– HYBRIDITY. In that part of California all the workers who flooded in each day (they could not afford to live there) were people of mixed Mexican European ancestry known as Chicanos. Despite Chicano having been once a derogatory word, a shameful designation, a decision was made to claim it in a positive way. They accepted being a people of mixed racial ancestry. Chicano identity was something to be claimed with pride!

Mixed ancestry is still a sensitive issue in Australia. "Naming" who you are, has special significance for First Nations' people. For many, their identity is a choice.

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he [or she] lives.

However, those from remote and rural Indigenous communities have an identity which flows from being immersed in traditional culture and the kinship system. They do not make a "choice" about being Aboriginal people, they just are! While in the US the word hybridity has currency, we dare not use it in Australia for good reason as it will be interpreted as an insult. However, I recall an Indigenous participant in an International Training Institute, who once leapt to her feet and said, "I now have permission to be who I am. I am a person of mixed ancestry."

Lurking behind this is the deep-seated racism which plagues all societies. Yes, we are familiar with how racism is endemic in societies dominated by western culture, especially the Australian version, but it exists all over the globe, for example among the Japanese, the Han Chinese and in India where one never ever dares to say anything out loud about a person's skin colour. And racist disparagement towards First Nations peoples all over the world abounds.

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However, the reality is that more and more in today's world people have mixed ancestries. Just as there is a spectrum with sexual identities, so there is a spectrum with ethnicity. It is not binary just one thing or another. So, the fundamental issue is twofold: first, to decide to be who one is, second, to honour the fantastic diverse ancestry of others. Humanity's future requires transcending the racism which can so set people apart.

Third word. I just missed the ABC session which claimed that **ABSOLUTISM** was the greatest danger facing our society today. But it rang a bell because I think the polarising of social issues, in particular is just one symptom. It is part of a simplistic binary interpretation of reality and then purporting that there is only one thing that is absolutely right.

This is a political, social, intellectual and religious issue where for instance strong men can rule so often justified by faux and rigged democratic elections. However, such a convergence of power gives credence to Lord Acton's famous quote, "All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". While civil freedoms are much under threat, I believe that the future of humanity depends on re-empowering democratic institutions so that the power structures can be called to account.

There are religious examples here where followers believe they are absolutely right and where ecclesiastical institutions can enforce conformity both overtly and covertly.

Binary assumptions lead to interpreting everything through the lens of a very reduced view of the world. People then live in protective bubbles never exposed to other ideas. Media moguls act as if they are endorsed with absolute influence in order to feed peoples fantasies. Humanity's future requires transcending and demolishing absolutism.

My fourth word is **CHOSEN-NESS** and the need to demolish the myth of exceptionalism. Having grown up in the Christian tradition I can recall the text in the first epistle of Peter "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." While the idea of chosen-ness is justified on the grounds of being chosen for a greater purpose (to enlighten the world about the love of God) the sad thing is that a sense of being chosen has morphed into particular peoples, nations and religions thinking that they are ordained with a specialness which sets them above others; only they are the "right" ones.

Chosen-ness is linked again to the racism - justified by a mythology or a religion - which sets people apart with a good dose of absolutism. The worst legacy of the British Empire is partition, especially when used to justify carving up nations according to religion. No wonder Gandhi wept when Jinnah got his way for having a separate Pakistan. Sadly, the modern state of Israel is now on the brink of becoming a nation where one religion holds total sway. The Balkan wars of the 90's led to ghastly "ethnic cleansing". You can no doubt think of many other examples.

Incidentally this sense of "chosen-ness" is deeply embedded in the Western cultural legacy we have inherited. In America it is called "manifest destiny". In Australia it has been the lucky country.

Humanity's future requires demolishing exceptionalism and believing that all peoples, nations, cultures and even religions are equally blessed because they all have gifts which can enhance the common civilising process.

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The last word. Finally, I dare to suggest that humanity's future is bound up with **RELIGION**. Here I mean the emergence of a new religious sensibility which is based on imagining a life affirming story which binds humanity together. It could be called a universalising myth of the meaning of life. History has taught us that what enables peoples to see themselves differently has been religious awakenings which have birthed new religious movements. Such religious expressions arose when people were urged to transcend societal collapse (the Roman Empire) or to be lifted up as the downtrodden ones (the rise of Islam). In each case there is a new naming of the verbal symbol G-O-D to express ultimate transcendent reality.

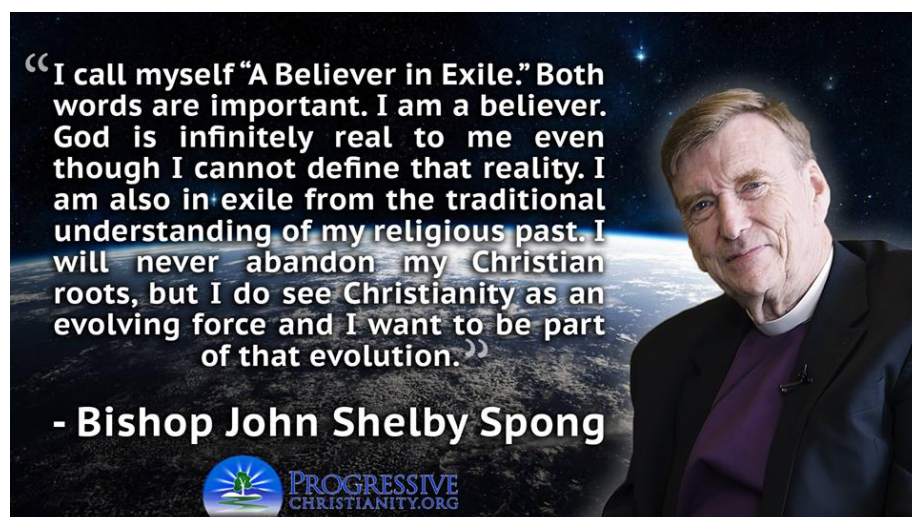
What might a 21st century religious expression look like? First, I don't think it is a melding or a collaboration of existing religions such as the *Parliament of World Religions*. Rather what emerges has to transcend (not necessarily negate) the religious expressions which arose in the past. I cautiously suggest these defining characteristics for a 21st century religious sensibility.

It would:

- *evolve in synch with the realities of a post-modern world view.*
- *touch the imagination and hearts of ordinary people.*
- *crystallise a common vision of human-ness and inter-connected community.*
- *affirm a spirituality which emerges from valuing creation.*
- *be clear about the dehumanising forces which negate life.*
- *have the power to transform individuals and the social order with the freedom necessary to take responsibility for life.*
- *acknowledge the ultimate reality of mystery and that humans, while having to make choices for life are never finally in charge of things.*

Some might say, "Well what of the existing religions?" I suggest they will stand or fall by whether or not they can incorporate the above characteristics. Humanity's future challenges us to forge a new overarching mythology which binds us together as a global family and transcends the reduced, life denying forces with a spirituality, and energy which reconciles, restores and unites us to live a common future – all creatures of the life-giving mother earth.

Jonathan Barker



Something to think about

Esmond Dowdy

I am inspired by the writings of the author, Peter Rollins.

From Wikipedia we learn that he was born in Northern Ireland in 1973, and has become a writer, public speaker, philosopher, producer and theologian.

Rollins has developed a “religionless” interpretation of Christianity, an approach that he has named *pyrotheology*. This is an interpretation that views faith as a particular way of engaging with the world, rather than a set of beliefs about the world.¹

In writing on a progressive Christian theology for Easter, Carl Gregg refers to a powerful monologue, written by Rollins, that speaks to what it might look like to practice - or fail to practice - the resurrection of Jesus.² In his monologue, Rollins begins with the intentionally shocking or provocative assertion that:

Without equivocation or hesitation, I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ.

**This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you,
and I am not afraid to say it publicly,
no matter what some people may think.**

Then, after a dramatic pause, he continues:

I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor;

I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system.

However, there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are.

I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out,

when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.

(Used with permission of the author.³)

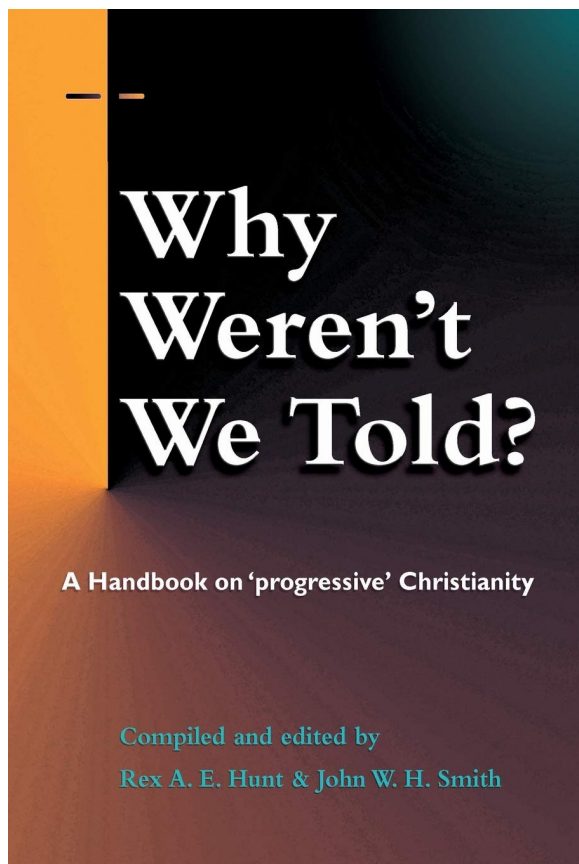
What an impressive understanding of the resurrection, and of our challenging role in continuing the pastoral, prophetic and justice ministries of Jesus!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Rollins

² [“Practice Resurrection”: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter | Carl Gregg \(patheos.com\)](#)

³ Peter Rollins’ Homepage is found at <https://peterrollins.com>

Book Reviews



Book Review: 'Why Weren't We Told?'

This is not a new book – it was published in 2013 – but a decade has not diluted the significance of the issues it explores. If you haven't explored it, and you are drawn to the expansive view progressive Christianity takes, this may be a stimulating book for you. It is available as an e-book for very modest cost.

The book calls itself a 'Handbook' and it is just that: a compilation of pieces by many progressive Christian thinkers. The compilers and editors, Rex Hunt and John Smith, are both ordained Uniting Church ministers and the contributors they have assembled comprise a distinguished list of Christian thinkers from Australia, New Zealand, UK and USA.

The book does not pretend to be an ordered exposition of what 'progressive' means in a Christian context. Rather, it is a rich resource for all Christians and seekers who chafe under dogma and theistic thinking that seem of questionable relevance in facing the challenges of today.

In his introduction, Rex Hunt makes a telling point about the current state of Christianity: 'we live in a time of transition rather than tradition' and the cameos that populate the first part of the book reflect this theme of transition. Each is a self-contained commentary or reflection, of just one or two pages, and no attempt has been made to harmonise content or come to 'an agreed position' on any matter.

In addition to being a compilation of stimulating commentary that dares to question what many Christians might consider to be beyond questioning, there are longer essays addressing issues crucial to a progressive Christian stance and narratives from faith communities challenging Christian orthodoxy in many ways.

The book's final section is a valuable resource for those responsible for planning or leading worship. It has examples of hymns, prayers and liturgies that show that the progressive 'time of transition' for Christian worship is not a matter of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Rather, these examples of authentic worship speak to a world of today that is not satisfied with old certainties and conformities.

This is a thought-provoking book for the discomfited.

Don Sinnott

Brian McLaren, *Do I stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed and the Disillusioned*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2022.

Former English teacher and pastor, the American Brian D. McLaren is a well-known advocate for 'a new kind of Christianity' and author of many well-regarded books since 1998 (<https://brianmclaren.net/about-brian/>). *Do I stay Christian?* is his latest book and for many good reasons, has been warmly endorsed by Richard Rohr.

It is a book for the times in the mostly declining church in developed Western countries. It is profoundly evangelical but not in the usual way. Rather, it honestly engages the reality that faces hurt and thoughtful members of congregations who have not yet left mainstream denominations and who harbour doubts about individualistic approaches to sin and salvation, are deeply disappointed by the behaviour of clergy and church leaders, and who are broadly disillusioned by simplistic preaching and theology, among many other things. Such constructive engagement may also assist those who have already left to reconsider.

Do I stay Christian? is structured in three parts in response to that primary question. Part One outlines the 'no' case including because Christianity: "Has Been Vicious to Its Mother (Anti-Semitism) ... Suppression of Dissent (Christian vs. Christian Violence) ... High Global Death Toll - and Life Toll (Crusader Colonialism) ... Loyal Company Men (Institutionalism) ... Real Master (Money) ... White Old Boys' Network (White Patriarchy) ... Is Stuck (Toxic Theology) ... Is a Failed Religion (Lack of Transformation) ... Great Wall of Bias (Constricted Intellectualism) ... Is a Sinking, Shrinking Ship of Wrinkling People (Demographics).

The 'yes' case for *Do I stay Christian?* in Part Two includes because: "Leaving Hurts Allies (and Helps Their Opponents) ... Leaving Defiantly or Staying Compliantly Are Not My Only Options ... Where Else Would I Go? ... It Would Be a Shame to Leave a Religion in Its Infancy ... of Our Legendary Founder ... Innocence Is an Addiction, and Solidarity is the Cure ... I'm Human ... Christianity is Changing (for the Worse and for the Better) ... To Free God ... Because of Fermi's Paradox and the Great Filter".

Part Three provides advice on How to stay Christian if that is the choice made. Here the chapters are: "Include and Transcend; Start with the Heart; Re-Wild; Find the Flow; Reconsecrate Everything; Renounce and Announce; Stay Loyal to Reality; Stay Human".

McLaren says he would be happy if readers could stay Christian and embody a form of (Progressive Christian) faith that will help reverse the problems in Part One and embody the aspirations in Parts Two and Three. But for those who: "need to discover that Christian faith wasn't meant to be our tree. It was meant to be our song. Whenever we sing with love, joy, peace and patience, whenever we sing with kindness, gentleness, generosity and justice, there we manifest what being human means to us. Our song is our gift to the world".

Kym Bills

(Amazon Australia link: <https://www.amazon.com.au/Do-Stay-Christian-Disappointed-Disillusioned/dp/1250262798> A review by Jon Sweeney with a videoed author interview is at this link: https://www.pdcnet.org//collection/fshow?id=covrb_2022_0072_0016_0017&pdfname=covrb_2022_0072_0000_0016_0017.pdf&file_type=pdf

Just Do It

We all have reasons why we don't do the things we say we want to. Our minds and hearts know the person we want to be and the life we want to live, but it seems awesomely difficult sometimes to put that knowledge into practice. Nevertheless, the answer is (with apologies to Nike) **Just Do It**.

If you want to see a change, there is no substitute for action. In case you are tempted to think this is a modern problem, consider these words from the Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now.

*You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it.*

From the Weekly Liturgy of Progressive Christianity, found at
ProgressiveChristianity.org : [Just Do It](#)

