



You are invited to participate in the launch of this new venture, a successor to the SEMINARY OF THE THIRD AGE which over the past six years has offered a lively program for all who are interested to explore a meaningful faith in the context of our present times.

The PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY FORUM
provides a new format for continuing this exploration.

FORUM LAUNCH on THURSDAY FEBRUARY 1st

will feature guest speaker Rev Dr Sean Gilbert, Lecturer in Pastoral Studies at the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology.

Sean's theme will be '*The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.*' (from East Coker by TS Eliot).

The launch is free and will also be live streamed, but we would appreciate your registration through [Humanitix](#).

The FORUM will then be held on the first Thursday of each month from March to December at 7pm.

PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY NETWORK of SA

Mail c/- Effective Living Centre,
26 King William Rd, Wayville 5034

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Phone 8271 0329

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<https://www.facebook.com/pcnetsa/>

Task Group 2024

Janeen Barker
Jonathan Barker
Kym Bills
Esmond Dowdy

Maureen Howland
Fergus McGinley
Don Sinnott - Chair

Endings and Beginnings

Farewell Sem3A, Welcome PCForum...

As I began writing this some lines from a 1998 song by a group called Semisonic kept running through my mind:

*Closing time, every new beginning comes
From some other beginning's end.*

There's a temptation to lament the 'closing down' of something excellent and much cherished, but these lines suggest the possibility of renewal, of something new blooming from the seeds of the old.

At the end of 2017, when we were brainstorming ideas for the 2018 PCNet program, University of the 3rd Age was mentioned. Norm Habel's reaction was that if we could have University of the 3rd Age, why not Seminary of the 3rd Age? Sem3A took off from there, with Norm's customary enthusiasm behind it!

2018 seems so long ago, (6 years!) and since then we've covered a surprising amount of ground. We began with some re-thinking, beginning with *The Mystery called God* and going on to look at *How to Read the Bible*, *Spirituality*, and just who is *The Bloke Called Jesus*.

In **2019** we looked at *Faith in the 21st Century*, trauma- *Why Such Suffering?*, controversy- *Why is Theology Such a Bother?* and the relevance of the big themes - *Wisdom* and *Christmas* among them.

2020 looked at *What it Means to be Progressive*, perspectives on *Interpreting Scripture*, *Prayer in Transitional Times*, and the *Multifaith World*.

Covid interrupted and we had to make do with presenting Sem3A online.

In **2021** we searched for authentic worship - *Jesus Now and the Cosmic Christ*, *Creation Spirituality* and *Authentic Witness, from Bonhoeffer to Authentic Self-hood*.

2022 looked at *Relationships - Religion/Culture, Religion/Ethics, Faith Past/Present and Faith/Global Concerns*.

In **2023** we partnered with EAG (the Environmental Action Group of the UCSA Synod) to explore *Our Place in Creation*, highlighting the importance of caring for God's creation. We looked at *First Nations' Spirituality*, the challenges of being the *Progressive Church*, and the task of *Deciphering Faith* for these times. The year showed a growing extension for PCNet into perspectives on social issues, with the Sunday afternoon series *People on the Edge*. This series also offered an opportunity to attend for those who prefer not to come out at night.

What a long way we've come!

Where to from here? Here's to the launch of *Progressive Christianity Forum* - who knows where it will take us...

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2024

The end of 2023 also saw the resignation of two long-standing members of the PCNet Task Group, Norm Habel and David McKirdy, both of whom having made an inestimable contribution to Sem3A over its life-time. Our heartfelt thanks to both - without them Sem3A would not have achieved as it did.

I finish as I began with lines from the song Closing Time:

*Closing time, time for you to go out
To the places you will be from*

Thank you Norm and David

Maureen Howland
December 2023





AN INVITATION TO ATTEND THE 2024 SERIES

Welcome to the 2024 series of challenging topical presentations exploring how people of faith can engage creatively with a deeply troubled and troubling world. Following the very successful five-year Seminary of the Third Age presentations, we move to a new series title and format in which the exploration continues and expands. Those who pursue freshness and authenticity in expressing their faith will find much food for thought in the 2024 series.

- February 1st** [FORUM LAUNCH](#) - Rev Dr Sean Gilbert
- March 7th** [CRITICAL ISSUES FACING THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY](#)
Rev Dr Jonathan Barker
- April 4th** [THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SPIRITUALITY REVOLUTION](#)
Rev Esmond Dowdy
- May 2nd** [THE CONTRIBUTION OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN VOICES](#) - Kym Bills
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- June 6th** THE CONTINUING TASK OF RE-IMAGING GOD
Rev Dr Lee Levett-Olson
- July 4th** CRITICAL ISSUES FACING THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA
Mark Waters
- August 1st** WORSHIP: THE PROGRESSIVE EDGE OF THEOLOGY
Rev Jenni Hughes
- September 5th** THE WONDER OF THE SCRIPTURES TO BE RE-INTERPRETED - Rev Prof Vicky Balabanski
- October 3rd** THE JOURNEY OF DECOLONISATION: A PERSONAL REFLECTION - Dr Rosemary Dewerse
- November 7th** THE CHALLENGES OF POLARISATION IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH - Fergus McGinley
- December 5th** RECEIVING THE SACRED STORY WITH IMAGINATION
Rev Dr Sarah Agnew

cont.

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Progressive Christianity Forum takes place at the Effective Living Centre, 26 King William Road, Wayville, SA on the First Thursday evening of each month, February to December, 7:00 – 8:30pm;

Attendance Cost

\$15 per session, \$12 concession, \$5 per-session live streaming. A full year subscription to all sessions is available for \$90.

Registration

Options for registration and payment are,

- the HUMANITIX website at <https://www.humanitix.com/au>; search Progressive Christianity Forum - bookings are now open for the first four sessions and full year subscriptions,
- the booking links for [The Progressive Christianity Forum](#) on the Effective Living Centre (ELC) website effectiveliving.ucasa.org.au,
- contacting the ELC office on (08) 8271 0329 (Tues – Fri, 10 am – 2 pm),
- cash or credit card on the night.

Dr Don Sinnott

Chair of the PCNet Task Group

December 2023



A TRIBUTE TO NORM HABEL

I first met Norm in 2014 when I joined the PCNet Task Group.

A seminal moment in our relationship remains very clear in my mind. It occurred during one of our annual planning days. We were canvassing ideas for our future program when someone mentioned the University of the 3rd Age. Norm immediately jumped in and suggested a Seminary of the 3rd Age, to which I replied: 'yes, and you could be the Seminary's Head.'

And so Sem3A was born. Over its six-year history, Norm has contributed nine presentations on a diverse range of topics:

- March 1 & 8, 2018 The God factor
- May 3, 2018 The Interpretation factor
- May 16 & 23, 2019 The trauma factor
- March 12, 2020 Perspectives on being progressive
- August 26, 2021 Searching for an authentic spirituality of creation
- August 18, 2022 The relationship between faith's past and present
- May 25, 2023 First Nation's spirituality

I would often act as Norm's chauffeur after Task Group meetings and Sem3A sessions. During the journey up the hill to Kalyra, I enjoyed our informal conversations in which we both got to know each other better. I was particularly fascinated to learn of his colourful history in the Lutheran Church. One day he asked me a pointed question: 'When are we going to hear you speak at Sem3A?' It started me thinking what someone like me with no theological training might have to contribute. The result was last month's presentation *Deciphering science and religion: the faith journey of an earth scientist*. So, with that box in my conscience having at last been ticked, my decision to retire from this task group was made a little easier. Thank you, Norm. Working with you, and getting to know you as a friend, has been a real highlight of the latter years of my faith journey.

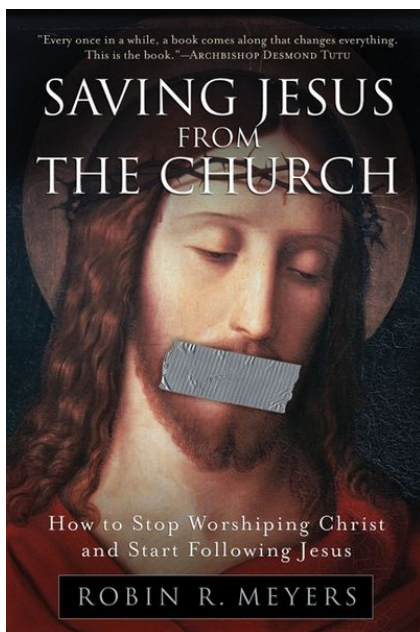
All of us in the Task Group have valued your insights, creativity, good humour and friendship over our time together. So much so that, earlier in today's meeting, we unanimously agreed to make you a Life Member of PCNetSA.

Happy retirement!

David McKirdy
December 2023



Book Reviews



SAVING JESUS FROM THE CHURCH

I have recently re-read *Saving Jesus from the Church*, written by Robin Meyers, pastor of the Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City for over 20 years, and professor in the philosophy department at Oklahoma City University.

I found the publication refreshing, engaging and illuminating, and make the following pertinent observations from it:

Dedication. This book is dedicated “to all the men and women who have chosen the parish ministry as their life’s work, and yet do not wish to be considered harmless artifacts from another age.”

Endorsement. This publication is endorsed by

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu — *Every once in a while, a book comes along that changes everything. This is the book, and*
- Bishop John Shelby Spong — *Meyers is a well-read scholar and a superb communicator. He writes with a refreshing honesty and a disarming authority. This book is a treat.*

Relevance. *Saving Jesus from the Church* was published in 2009, and is just as relevant today, maybe even more so.

Meyers is a member of the Jesus Seminar, which seeks to *peel back the layers of faith, dogma, theology and interpretation from the gospels, in order to expose the “real”, historical Jesus to public gaze*¹. Meyers acknowledges that through his involvement in the Jesus Seminar he has *found new ways to uncover, correct, and communicate the Good News* (p233).

1 [Getting the gist of a 'historical' Jesus: the Jesus Seminar 30 years on \(theconversation.com\)](https://www.theconversation.com/2013/01/getting-the-gist-of-a-historical-jesus-the-jesus-seminar-30-years-on)

Downloaded on 11 November, 2023

Probing questions. The prologue highlights probing questions by which Meyers sets the context for the unfolding of his central theme — *how to stop worshipping Christ and start following Jesus*. For example:

- What kind of God did Jesus reveal?
- What is the proper object of our worship, and what would it take to make Christianity compelling, even irresistible, again?
- How can our faith become biblically responsible, intellectually honest, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant?
- Who was Jesus before he was the Christ? What does it really mean to follow him as a teacher and not just worship him as a supernatural deity on a rescue mission?
- Why haven't I done more to promote biblical literacy and invite others to consider an alternative way of being the church in our time?

Content. The chapter headings of *Saving Jesus from the Church* reveal the directions in which Meyers would take us. The headings are:

- 1 Jesus the Teacher, Not the Saviour
- 2 Faith as Being, Not Belief
- 3 The Cross as Futility. Not Forgiveness
- 4 Easter as Presence, Not Proof
- 5 Original Blessing, Not Original Sin
- 6 Christianity as Compassion, Not Condemnation
- 7 Discipleship as Obedience, Not Observance
- 8 Justice as Covenant, Not Control
- 9 Prosperity as Dangerous, Not Divine
- 10 Religion as Relationship, Not Righteousness

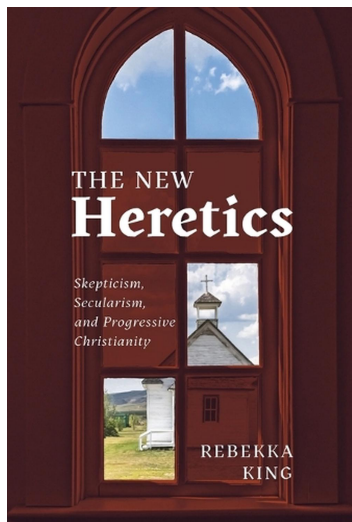
Conclusion. The conclusion from the back cover of the book reads:

“The marriage of bad theology and hypocritical behaviour by the church has eroded our spiritual lives. Taking the best of biblical scholarship, Meyers recasts core Christian concepts in an effort to save Christianity from its obsession with personal salvation. Not a plea to try something brand new, but rather the recovery of something very old, *Saving Jesus from the Church* shows us what it means to follow Jesus' teachings today.”

Book Reviews

Rebekka King, *The New Heretics: Skepticism, Secularism, and Progressive Christianity.*

New York University Press, 2023, ISBN: 9781479836147



Canadian Dr Rebekka King is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Middle Tennessee State University. Her long-gestated book reports on intensive PhD ethnographic fieldwork from 2008 to 2010 within five churches around Toronto to help define and understand Progressive Christianity. It is enhanced by King's further academic development. Progressive churches studied were United Church of Canada George Street and West Hill, Holy Cross Lutheran, St Matthias Anglican and an Anglican Church (pseudonym St Peter's) that was not Progressive Christian per se but featured a reading group engaging with progressive texts.

King describes a spectrum of Progressive Christianity that tends to be more radical in Canada than in the US. An Appendix to the book lists eight points (2003 version) in the US Center for Progressive Christianity established in 1996 which apply to progressive Christians and begin with an approach to God through the life and teaching of Jesus and which seek to embrace diversity, tolerance and questions rather than dogmatism. The eight points from the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity (2004 version) are mostly similar but refer only to roots in Christian heritage and traditions rather than ongoing belief in Jesus or God.

This difference is most apparent in the West Hill United Church. (The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925 from a merger of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational denominations.) In 2004, West Hill's Minister, Gretta Vosper, founded and is president of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity based at her church, where atheists and sceptics could feel comfortable belonging but not believing and in rejecting specific beliefs and practices. King reports in an Epilogue that from 2013 Vosper explicitly described her beliefs as atheist rather than nontheist and she reportedly did not believe in God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. In 2017-18 Vosper faced a United Church National Council challenge to her suitability to remain a Minister (dubbed a 'heresy' trial) but after legal action this was confidentially settled in her favour, perhaps because of a lack of procedural fairness involving the application of retrospective criteria. Atheism is also a characteristic of former Anglican Priest Don Cupitt's 'Sea of Faith' movement in the UK referred to as 'non-realism' regarding God. While these two key radical figures are not currently representative of Progressive Christianity worldwide, King as a sympathetic researcher, suggests that the longer-term trajectory of Progressive Christianity, at least in Canada, is towards atheism. Her book "is about Christians who don't believe in Jesus" rejecting his divinity as an ethical conviction and preferencing science, secularity, disbelief, scepticism and contestation.

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2024

The New Heretics is linked to Peter Berger's 1979 sociology of religion book *The Heretical Imperative* and argument that "we are all heretics now" based on the etymology of heresy from the Greek *hairesis* 'to choose' against orthodoxy and concomitant anti-authoritarianism. Many Progressive Christians are proud of the 'heretic' moniker and seek to make an informed and ethical humanist choice. While King quotes accessibly from her lived participant observation and from 70 interesting and insightful in-depth interview transcripts, this is a serious academic book of 257 pages laced with anthropological, ethnographic, historical and theological theory. It is not for the faint-hearted casual reader. While space does not permit substantive engagement with the theory, an outline of the history and characteristics of Progressive Christianity can be given.

The initial theological driving force for Progressive Christianity in these five Canadian churches was the writing, lecturing and pastoral presence of 'humble and charismatic' US Episcopal Bishop John Shelby (Jack) Spong who died in 2021 at the age of 90. Spong was most active in the US and several of his 25+ books sold over a million copies. Spong was also a catalyst for Progressive Christianity in Australia including a 2001 lecture given at the Effective Living Centre of Christ Church Uniting Church in Wayville, SA. Spong popularised lessons from biblical criticism and demythologising the Bible, called out 'texts of terror' and theistic favouritism and capriciousness, and engaged with science and reason in contrast to miracles and traditional creeds and liturgies. He argued that the church must change or die and appealed to those who were thoughtful Christian 'alumni' and 'believers in exile'.

Other Progressive Christian writers important to members of the studied Canadian churches and beyond include Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. A *Living the Questions* program of videos and discussion was said to be used as a progressive alternative to Alpha. Group collective reading and discussion of such material is characteristic of Progressive Christianity and increasingly part of a 'deconversion' process in place of the Bible which is considered a tool of colonialism and oppression. Liturgies and hymns are regularly rewritten to be more inclusive and to omit traditional divine understandings, miracles and militant evangelism.

King argues that Progressive Christianity is best understood as a reaction to and in dialogue with more conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist versions of Protestant Christianity. Progressive Christianity shares some characteristics with liberal Christians' focus on humanitarian social justice but rather than dealing with ethically troublesome biblical passages in relation to their historical theological context or reading them metaphorically or retaining a sense of mystery about the nature of Trinity-God, many Canadian Progressive Christians considered that it was more ethically honest and created lower barriers to entry for secular seekers to dispense with biblical scholarship and 'God' altogether.

cont.

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King (p144) summarises that: *“the very ethos of progressive Christianity evokes a fluid, continuous, and unfinished evolution of beliefs, practices and identity. Progressive Christianity emboldens the assumption of a new way of being Christian ... constructed in relationship with and resistance to a Protestant proximate other whose identity and discursive tropes are at times subsumed. This antagonism is observable in the deconversion narrative. Their use of linguistically performative tropes enables progressive Christians to suspend themselves between past, present and future, all three of which are ambiguous and inconclusive”.*

I find myself seeing the claimed radical atheistic trajectory of Progressive Christianity in Canada as a warning to Progressive Christians in Australia with whom I identify. I am supportive of something like the US Center’s eight points but not at the expense of Trinitarian mystery, ecumenism and a resurrection faith that is embodied, performative and allows for emotion and Spirit-led prayer and gifts and not just intellectual knowledge and humanist ethics. *The New Heretics* is recommended particularly for its scholarship and ability to make us review and rethink our own faith and beliefs.

Kym Bills

October 2023



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email contactpcnetsa@gmail.com