

Kym Bills, PC Forum lecture, 4 April 2024

Thank you and good evening, it is a pleasure to be with you here or online. In talking tonight about 'The Contribution of Progressive Christian Voices' I will mention some history and a few pioneers of Progressive Christianity, before moving to focus on the diversity of more recent and contemporary contributions – both positive, & negative reactions illustrative of a significant contribution. Plenty of time will be left at the end for questions or a comment.

The Rev Professor Sir Lloyd Geering turned 106 on 26th February this year. He was ordained in the New Zealand Presbyterian Church in 1943. After studying mathematics, he became a theologian, a member of both the Jesus Seminar and Sea of Faith Network, a participant in the *Living the Questions* program (an alternative to the evangelical Alpha course), and once faced a trial for heresy after a conservative Minister and laymen (no women) lodged a complaint in 1967 alleging 'doctrinal error' relating to his progressive views. Over his long life he has lived through, participated in, and led, key aspects of Progressive Christianity. As a centenarian, Geering joined the Intergenerational Climate Ambassadors group in 2021. He considers both Christian and Muslim fundamentalism to be a social evil. One of his many books is the 2013 *From the Big Bang to God: Our Awe-Inspiring Journey of Evolution*.

Also in 2013, Sir Lloyd wrote the Foreword to the excellent *Why Weren't We Told? A Handbook on 'progressive' Christianity*.

Geering's Foreword highlights the role of English Bishop John Robinson in his 1963 book *Honest to God*, that sought to popularise, and make accessible to laypersons, the insights and questions that liberal theologians had been grappling with for decades. Geering writes that there was nothing very new in Robinson's book for theologians who had read works by Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But a great gulf had opened up between theologians and what was being preached in mainline churches. Geering thinks laypeople were 'not told' out of a pastoral concern that challenging new questions might undermine their faith. However, radical change had been managed after the dawn of Protestant Liberalism in the second half of the 19th century, leading to church vitality and growth. Called 'Modernism' in the Roman Catholic Church, this progressive liberalism was crushed by the Vatican until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965.

Within Protestantism, reaction against liberalism came from the publication of a series of booklets between 1910 and 1915 called 'The Fundamentals' that insisted on the literal inerrancy of the Bible, and doctrines such as the 'penal substitution' sacrificial atonement of Christ on the cross. Such conservative fundamentalism spread from the US to Australasia. It steadily grew in strength while liberals focussed on ecumenism, dialogue with other religions, social justice and more radical ideas such as Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* TV series and movement that developed to a point where the former Church of England priest and philosopher-theologian became an agnostic and a 'non-realist'.

The *Jesus Seminar* jointly led by Robert Funk in the US sought to find passages in the New Testament that could confidently be traced back to Jesus. But with too many confounding factors, it had limited success as did earlier and periodic attempts to search for the so-called 'historical Jesus' – which tended instead to find the Jesus of the historian. New theologies were linked to postmodernism's distrust of grand narratives, and others to liberation theology, feminist theology and so forth. Some liberal theologians and clergy sought to counter the spread of fundamentalism and began to speak of themselves as 'progressive' Christians who became networked around the world and in Australia, leading to the first Progressive Christianity *Common Dreams* conference held in Sydney in 2007 with American Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong keynote speaker.

Bishop Jack Spong and US theologian Dr Marcus Borg were among leaders carrying the torch for progressive Christianity. Spong spoke in Adelaide in 2001 and 2003 and was the catalyst for the formation of PCNet SA, based here at Christ Church. Much of what Spong wrote was not new theologically, but his writing and preaching was persuasive, and he spoke especially to those who had left mainstream churches or might be poised to do so. Borg was an acclaimed scholar with similar communication gifts. Other leaders, from the Roman Catholic tradition, included John Dominic Crossan and Fr Richard Rohr. Such Progressive Christianity was comfortable with questions, dialogue, and not seeking to preach a new doctrine or require a different 'right' set of beliefs.

To discuss the contribution of newer 'Progressive Christian Voices', I am going to draw from a group of book reviews I have written for PCNet SA that are available on our website (<https://pcnetsa.org/book-reviews/>) so that you can access more detail should you wish. Twelve reviews were written in the past year, plus

one covering a trilogy. They are quite diverse. Some are about Progressive Christianity directly and others address theological matters that contrast with the unchallengeable doctrines and beliefs held by more literalist Christians who consider themselves fundamentalists, conservatives, evangelicals or all three. Some books encourage newer forms of worship consistent with science, and social justice for the poor and marginalised, including First Nations people.

Remaining within a mainstream Trinitarian liberal faith tradition, I embrace and take a broad perspective on Progressive Christian Voices - but not uncritically.

The trilogy by Ben Pugh is about theories of the atonement – how it is that Christians can be embraced by God through salvation in Jesus to become a loving new humanity. Despite his charismatic evangelical roots, Pugh's three books are interdisciplinary and seek to be objective. I draw here particularly from the first book *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*. Pugh argues that having God the Father require Christ's suffering on the cross leads to an understanding of an inflexible, demanding and violent God - turning many away from the Church. Instead of 'penal substitution', he details older traditions and atonement metaphors such as Irenaeus (c180CE) on Jesus as a representative 2nd Adam, and Peter Abelard's (c1100 CE) view of atonement based on love and mystical participation. The violence of the cross was human – based on seeking to retain political and religious power.

Luke Burgis in *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire, and How to Want What You Need* is based on the work of René Girard about a different form of power – the use of the power of sacrifice and scapegoating through the centuries. Burgis's more practical book draws on Girard's concept of 'mimetic desire' - a mimicking exacerbated by the pervasive power of consumerist culture, advertising and social media to influence why people want what they want. Part 1 of the book addresses Hidden Models, Distorted Reality, Social Contagion and the Invention of Blame. Part 2's 'Transformation of Desire' includes 15 'tactics' such as disruptive empathy to help ensure that our desires are grounded in our values, with echoes of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, to seek what we deeply desire (our hearts are restless until they rest in God).

Former Catholic Priest, Anthony Bartlett in *Signs of Change: The Bible's Evolution of Divine Nonviolence* also draws from René Girard and in this case his 'transformative semiotics' (semiotics: involving sign processes and meaning

making). Bartlett shows that the arbitrary and violent God of much of Exodus, Deuteronomy and Kings, also evident among some prophets, reflects the anthropology, understanding and culture of the settings, authors and compilers, and that this influenced parts of the New Testament and how it has been read. Bartlett documents the roots and signs of an alternative understanding of God, and God's expectations of humanity, including compassion, forgiveness, non-violence and peace, begun in Genesis 1 and within Exodus, and developed in most of Job, Second Isaiah's servant passages, Ruth, Daniel and Jonah, and in many NT words and actions by Jesus and Paul. These form an alternative semiotics to challenge the dominant narrative and understanding of the Hebrew Bible and its continuing influence within the New Testament. PCNetSA Life Member Dr Norm Habel has written books with similar themes, and has emphasised Jeremiah's new covenant based on love and knowledge of God from the heart.

Former English teacher and American pastor Brian McLaren is internationally renowned within Progressive Christianity, having published 40 books since 1998. In *Do I stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed and the Disillusioned* he engages the reality that faces many 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. After comprehensively considering the 'yes' and 'no' cases, McLaren provides advice on how to stay Christian if that is the choice made, using the themes: Include and Transcend; Start with the Heart; Re-Wild; Find the Flow; Reconsecrate Everything; Renounce and Announce; Stay Loyal to Reality; and Stay Human.

David Kaden in *Christianity in Blue: How the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Theology Shape Progressive Identity* argues that: "*the emphasis of progressive Christianity is on this life and changing this world for the benefit of people now*" including by empathetically working for peace and justice. Kaden maintains that "*Biblical words tell us about people's experiences of the divine or the sacred ... not what the sacred actually is.*" Relationship is the lens through which he "*reads the entire Bible: God's relationship to Godself, God's relationship to people, people's relationship to each other, people's relationship*

to the planet, Christianity's relationship to Judaism and to other religious traditions, and the relationship of society's privileged to society's underprivileged" For Kaden, *"The word God is the word we use to describe [our] sense of connection"*. He writes that *"at its core, progressive Christianity is an invitation to love ... the triune God is love ... At the compassionate core of progressive Christianity is a commitment to see every person as Christ sees them – as beloved human beings worthy of love and acceptance."*

Roger Olson's *Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity* is by an orthodox conservative academic who statedly wishes to be fair and warm-hearted to those he disagrees with and not write a 'diatribe against progressive Christianity'. However, his main argument is that Liberal Theology, citing books by Spong and Borg, and associated Progressive Christianity is not authentic Christianity. He writes that *"Christ does not stand alone at the center of liberal Christianity (if at all)"*. He defines orthodoxy as 'Christian theism' such that Liberal and Progressive Christianity is not included, and ignores some Progressive Christian views, at least post-resurrection, on Jesus as the living Word and a person of the Trinity. Olson is most critical of Liberal: doubts with regard to miracles, the Virgin Birth, and the incarnate Jesus being God at birth; over-reliance on reason & modifying Biblical orthodoxy in light of science and modern culture; an excessive stress on God's immanence rather than being balanced with 'almighty' transcendence; and Liberal support for panentheism (the concept that God is greater than the universe but interpenetrates everything in it). Olson conflates contemporary Liberal and progressive views with secular modernism – & in contrast to post-modernism. But he ignores post-modernist questioning of grand narratives such as Christian orthodoxy. As you know, questioning is a hallmark of Progressive Christianity in contrast to Olsen's views on largely unchallengeable Biblical authority and conservative doctrine.

Randal Rauser in *Progressive Christians Love Jesus Too: A Response to Alisa Childers (and the heresy hunters)* provides an extended rebuttal of a book by Conservative fundamentalist Childers which criticises progressive Christianity. For Rauser, the anchor for Christianity is not 'sound biblical doctrine' but Jesus Christ. He writes: *"Confusing God's actions with our descriptions of them is a category mistake and what is truly foundational is loving Christian relationship. Such a relationship invites honest hard questions rather than binary thinking*

and blind assent to doctrines such as Biblical inerrancy and penal substitutionary sacrificial atonement as propounded by Childers.” Rauser emphasises that humility about knowledge is not relativism about truth. Doubt and questions do not inevitably condemn progressive Christians to Hell based on Childers’s select NT texts. He is also critical of the way her fundamentalism leads to defending OT texts that describe God as commanding & commending the eradication of entire people groups including the Amalekites and Canaanites. While Prof Rauser has a strong background in historical and biblical theology, at times he seems to lapse into a form of strident certainty of his own upbringing.

Rebekka King in *The New Heretics: Skepticism, Secularism, and Progressive Christianity* reports on her lengthy embedded ethnographic PhD study of five churches around Toronto (2 United Church, 2 Anglican, 1 Lutheran) to help define and understand Progressive Christianity. While not herself a Progressive Christian, her insider role was sympathetic. The initial driving force for Progressive Christianity in these five Canadian churches was the writing, lecturing and pastoral presence of Bishop Spong with whom King interacted and interviewed. She found that Toronto’s Progressive Christianity was more radical than in the US with West Hill United’s Minister, Gretta Vosper, the founder and President of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, eventually describing herself as an atheist while remaining Minister. Others were proud to be called (anti-orthodoxy) ‘heretics’ and sought to make informed and ethical humanist choices and to debate theological issues, but remained worshipping Christians.

Douglas Campbell in *Paul: An Apostle’s Journey* reconstructs Paul’s life from his letters and uses “this information to control the information supplied by Acts”. While Campbell is more conservative than me, his book persuasively softens a sometimes negative view of Paul held by many, such as by stressing Paul’s loving ethical values for church communities that should be outward looking. Campbell considers that for Paul, faith is not an individual condition for salvation but rather, based on the faith of Jesus, salvation meant that resurrection is open to all. He argues that Paul was an implicit universalist in which God’s plan was that everyone would be raised in glory - pagan and Jew alike. Such views may appeal to Progressive Christians seeking to respect and

include others. I wrote this review to illustrate again how broader theological scholarship can be an important contributor to Progressive Christian Voices.

Bruce Sanguin in *The Way of the Wind: The Path and Practice of Evolutionary Christian Mysticism* seeks a 'churchless incarnation' in the human heart.

Among others, Sanguin draws from Teilhard de Chardin's 'Omega Point', Ken Wilber's 'reintegration' model, and the NT Progressive Christianity scholarship of nonviolence activist Walter Wink who wrote five books based on the cosmic 'Powers'. While celebrating science and evolution, Sanguin now considers that most Progressive Christianity, like many liberal and evangelical branches of the Church, is excessively rational and arid. He says it lacks mysticism and spirituality, where mysticism involves seeking and experiencing loving union with Reality and all that is. He has a chapter on practices of self-emptying, evolutionary mysticism (including the use of purgative and psychedelic drugs). Well before he reached that point, he was a United Church of Canada Minister who moved from liberal Christianity to more challenging forms of Progressive Christianity based on evolution and spirituality, encouraging a new emerging church and faith based on universal and cosmic love and peace. Sanguin's 2010 book *If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics* provides a wonderful resource for Progressive Christianity, both individually and liturgically as a congregation. Several of the collected prayer-poems are available free online to be sampled (<https://progressivechristianity.org/resource/if-darwin-prayed-poems/>).

Late last year, the 50th Anniversary Edition of the classic book on liberation theology by the now 95 year old Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, was published with a new Introduction. I first read it 40 years ago and it remains fresh and rich, perhaps more so because of the influence it has had, not only encouraging preferential options for the poor and oppressed of Latin America, but more broadly in focusing on God's kingdom now - not just in some heavenly end time. Gutiérrez urged a theologically informed interdisciplinary structural response to inequality and injustice around the world. He also greatly influenced other theologies of the marginalised – feminist, Black, rainbow and so forth.

Sally Douglas in *Jesus Sophia: Returning to Woman Wisdom in the Bible, Practice and Prayer* provides an accessible update on her PhD thesis (<https://cdm20081.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p20081coll12/id/53>) with

worship and practice suggestions. Douglas is a Melbourne-based Uniting Church Minister. She acknowledges pioneering feminist Christian biblical scholarship about Sophia by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*In Memory of Her*, 1990; *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 1995) and Elizabeth Johnson (*She Who Is*, 1992) but takes the evidence further. In particular, the book shows that Sophia or Woman Wisdom in OT and intertestamental material included knowing God from the beginning, transformative wisdom, nonviolent anger at injustice, compassion, mercy and peace, vulnerable love, inviting all to a feast of abundance, abiding with God and us in freedom, and sustaining all things. Douglas argues that these characteristics were demonstrated by Jesus in his actions and sometimes in quoting or speaking as Sophia. Douglas encourages questions and discussion but is critical of a Progressive Christianity that she thinks shuns religious experience and encounter with the divine.

Sarah Agnew in *Embodied Performance: Mutuality, Embrace, and the Letter to Rome* wrote this book based on her University of Edinburgh PhD thesis - it is available from her as Minister in placement at Christ Church or from MediaCom. Her website (<https://www.sarahagnew.com.au/>) outlines her roles as a storyteller, poet and scholar. Pioneering scholarship on Mark's gospel by David Rhodes and colleagues included an emphasis on Mark as 'story' and the importance of considering how it was spoken to, and received by, its original audiences, and can be similarly powerfully spoken and 'performed' for contemporary congregations and their contexts. Agnew extends this by an emphasis on embodied performance with her own performed and critiqued exemplars. This develops newer forms of biblical interpretation that include Narrative Criticism and Biblical Performance Criticism. Her work incorporates different sacred terminology and new forms of storytelling, hymnody, poetry and art are used and celebrated in progressive Christian worship services.

In conclusion, let me summarise some key contributions of the Progressive Christian Voices we have surveyed. Negative reactions to them have helped illustrate the contributions. Of course, we can't claim material by Pugh, Bartlett, Burgin, Gutierrez, Campbell and Douglas as being by Progressive Christians. But alternative views of the atonement, Biblical non-violence, addressing mimetic desire, liberation theology with service to the poor, Pauline universalism, & feminist theology with a better understanding of how aspects

of both genders flow from images of the Godhead, are entirely consistent with, and even necessary for, Progressive Christianity and its contemporary voices.

Sir Lloyd Geering and the book *Why Weren't We Told?* provides a helpful platform to understand the history of Progressive Christianity and its contemporary themes. Bishop Jack Spong is important, in particular, for addressing both pastorally, and as adults, those who have left the church and who might be poised to do so, and encouraging their questioning. Brian McLaren has continued this emphasis. Rauser's critique of fundamentalist conservative evangelicals like Alisa Childers who attack Progressive Christianity and its proponents, is understandable but veers towards a different form of dogmatic intellectualism. Rebekka King's Canadian research celebrates Progressive Christianity's humble questions, doubts and anti-orthodox heresy but the Rev Gretta Vosper's atheism stands as a salutary warning of the dangers of purely humanist intellectualism.

Bruce Sanguin has provided liturgical prayer-poetry drawing from recent physics, cosmology and evolutionary biology and including a mystical panentheistic spirituality linking the divine and all creation. David Kaden has endorsed seeking Biblical texts that are congruent with current knowledge and emphasises relationship, compassion, practical service, love and acceptance. Sarah Agnew uses and extends new tools of narrative and performative biblical criticism and the arts to embody and enrich contemporary faith and worship.

Progressive Christianity as a reaction to, and correction of, dogmatic fundamentalism, has sometimes been overly intellectual as suggested by both Sanguin and Douglas. In my view, we can continue to be scientific and rational Progressive Christians while using head, heart and body combined holistically in a truly human manner as Agnew exemplifies.

Indeed, I consider that this is essential in our living and worship as we seek to follow Holy One in the mystery and love of the Three-in-One to serve our fellow human beings and steward the diversity and life of our imperilled planet...

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