

The Myth of an Infallible Bible

By Revd Dr Gregory Jenks

December 1, 2020

It is literally an article of faith for some Christians that the Bible is infallible. By that descriptor they are claiming at least two things: (1) The Bible is without any errors, and (2) the Bible is a guide for faith which will never mislead or fail to provide a reliable guide to the spiritual wisdom that a person needs at any time in their life.

Christians have actually killed each other over these claims, and even in recent times people have lost their jobs as seminary professors and congregational pastors under suspicion of somehow not defending such a view of the Bible.

All the same, and without wishing to offend colleagues and co-religionists who insist on believing the incredible and the ridiculous, this is a nonsensical claim for anyone to make about any historical text.

Let's start at the very beginning, as it is a very good place to begin according to another canonical text of western civilization, *The Sound of Music*.^[1]

Which Bible are we talking about and which set of books do we consider to constitute this collection of supposedly infallible texts? Already the heads of our fundamentalist friends will be hurting.

There is no such thing as "the Bible."

To the contrary, there are many collections of books which various sets of Christians recognise as the Bible for them.^[2] The Bible which is most likely in the mind of people who claim biblical infallibility is an expurgated edition of the Bible which is much beloved among Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian communities.

Category error?

Yes, indeed.

This whole debate is an ecclesiastical mad hatters party. The rare individual who enters the rabbit hole with some basic religious literacy feels a remarkable affinity to Alice in Wonderland, where the powers that be insist that words can mean whatever they choose to make them mean. But that is not so.

Leaving aside for now the rather important fact that Christians do not even agree on which books comprise the Bible, or in which order they should be arranged, the claim to possess an infallible sacred text fails on numerous other grounds.

It is simply impossible to have an infallible book:

All texts are generated by people in particular contexts and under the influence of various personal assumptions, many of them entirely beyond their conscious knowledge.

The texts will be inscribed using technologies and linguistic conventions at the time, and some of those features will be incomprehensible to readers from later times.

The documents will need to be preserved, and copies will need to be made. Indeed, we have thousands of handwritten copies of the biblical texts and no two of them agree in every single details. Oops!

In many cases they will need to be translated, even if just to update the font or the syntax for current readers.

The readers will change over time. There will be different individuals at various points in time. The kind of readers will change from the original audience to the clerics of the religious institutions to the mass readership of an industrial society with general education for all its citizens. The social location and existential context of the readers will vary enormously. They will each be influenced by some obscure mix of their personal experiences and their prior religious beliefs, not to mention their psychological needs.

Some of them will need to persuade us that their reading of their Bible is the only reading of an infallible Bible given to us by God, with absolute truths which remain constant for all time and across all cultures.

I would not buy a car from such a person and I will not embrace their concept of biblical infallibility either.

Fortunately for me as an Anglican, the community of spiritual practice of which I am both a member and a cultic official has a more nuanced understanding of the Bible, as well as a wider definition of the Scriptures—a definition which reflects ancient Christian wisdom.

I am encouraged to believe that all the spiritual wisdom which I need can be found in these sacred texts, but I am not required to subscribe to fairy tales about the divine origins of my Scriptures nor to ascribe ultimate truth status to everything my Bible says.

Thanks be to God.

The Very Revd Dr Gregory Jenks is Dean of Grafton and a religion scholar who has devoted his life to biblical scholarship.

<https://gregoryjenks.com>

[1] <https://www.metrolyrics.com/doremi-maria-and-the-children-lyrics-the-sound-of-music.html>

[2] For a current example of a reasonably ecumenical edition of the Christian Scriptures see the New Oxford Annotated Bible, which carefully explains which of the apocryphal texts that are part of the Bible for the vast majority of Christians over most of the 2,000 years are recognized in one or another faith community. It may not be sold in your local “Christian” (sic) bookstore, but that is another essay for another day.

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<https://www.progressivechristians.org.au/articles/the-myth-of-an-infallible-bible>

The Meaning of Inner Peace

If you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,
If you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles,
If you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it,
If you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time,
If you can take criticism and blame without resentment
If you can conquer tension without medical help,
If you can relax without alcohol,
If you can sleep without the aid of drugs,
Then You Are Probably The Family Dog!

-Source unknown

“God” Isn't in the Bible

Rev. Mark Sandlin

Language is more important than many of us realize. More precisely, the specific words we choose to use impact our way of thinking, our social behavior, and many other perspectives of our lives. It's actually a fairly recent development in the human brain in terms of our long history as a species. The frontal lobes of our brains have actually expanded to handle its expanded work requirements.

Now, there are certainly folks who do understand and acknowledge the importance and impact of language. For example, at the progressive church where I minister, we have an exceptionally hard time picking out hymns for our Sunday service. I particularly struggle when it comes to the naming of God.

Far too many hymns use masculine or aggressive terms for God like Father, King, Lord, Shield, Defender, etc. It's not just the controlling or combative image of God that concerns me, but also the way it prevents many people from seeing God in themselves. As my kids were growing up, the last thing I would have ever wanted would be for my daughter to get the message that God was more like her brother than her.

All of this is to say I think a lot about language and scientific evidence only reinforces with me that it is an exceptionally important task.

Recently, I've started having issues with a word that, well, I never expected to have problems with: God.

The roots of my problem probably started a while back when I came across a disheveled looking street preacher who was holding a Bible high above his head and shouting out, “God will save you from the fiery pits of Hell.” At some point, he looked right at me and said, “Son, have you given your life over to God?” I answered him saying, “I think the God that you know and the God that I know aren't the same God.” I pretty much regretted responding that way from the moment I said it, but the fact is, I said it.

As I've mentioned, I minister at a progressive church. During each of our services there is a time for the congregation to respond to the talk I give. Over time, it's been very interesting to listen to how various individuals name/describe God. The truth is, if they use the name at all, very few only say, “God.” It's much more likely that they say, “God,” then with a sort of apologetic look on their face for saying, “God,” they'll add, “the Universe, the spirit/thing that's larger than us,” or something like that.

Many of us have a theological issue with what the word “God” has come to represent. Conservative Christianity has always been the dominant social expression of Christianity in the U.S. Particularly, since our last presidential election, it's become harder and harder to recognize the God that group worships as being anything close to biblical, particularly when it comes to the teachings of Jesus. So, it really isn't all that surprising that progressive Christians have started having issues with the word “God.”

It turns out, that while it is perfectly understandable that we are having issues with the term “God” because of how conservative Christians are using it, we should actually have a bigger problem with the word for an entirely different reason: it isn't in the Bible.

Yep. “God” is not mentioned in the Bible.

“The hell it's not,” you say?

While it is true that even the earliest English translations of the Bible refer to the Hebrew/Christian deity as “God,” it’s not only a poor, but rather incorrect translation of the original Hebrew and Greek words used to refer to the deity. Worse yet, at least in my opinion, we’ve opted to use it as a proper name for God which is something the Bible never does.

In general, the Bible simply uses descriptors for God, particularly in the Old Testament. Elohay Kedem – the god of the beginning (Deuteronomy 33:27). Elohay Mishpat – the god of justice (Isaiah 30:18). Elohay Marom – the god of heights (Micah 6:6). Elohay Mikarov – the god who is near (Jeremiah 23:23). Elohay Mauzi – the god of my strength (Psalm 43:2). Elohay Tehilati – the god of my praise (Psalm 109:1). Elohim Chaiyim – the living god (Jeremiah 10:10). Elohay Elohim – the god of gods: (Deuteronomy 10:17).

You might notice the recurrence of Elohay/Elohim. They are the singular and plural forms of the Hebrew word for “deity.” Sometimes they are shortened to simply “El.” As in: El Yisrael – the god of Israel (Psalm 68:35). El HaShamayim – the god of the heavens (Psalm 136:26). El De’ot – the god of knowledge (1 Samuel 2:3). El Elyon – the most high god (Genesis 14:18). Immanu El – god is with us (Isaiah 7:14).

By capitalizing “God,” modern English translations give the impression that the uses of El/Elohim are proper names rather than descriptors pointing to a deity. Not only that, it’s a translation whose roots stray from the intended understanding of Elohim. The Hebrew here indicates “might, strength, most excellent, greatest, unequalled.” However, Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary tells us that the word “god” comes from a Germanic word that means “the invoked one.”

So, not only do most modern English interpretations suggest that “God” is the proper name for the Hebrew/Christian deity, the use of the word “god” betrays the original implications of the Hebrew description of the deity. As I said, we should have bigger issues with the word “God” than just how conservatives are using it.

In terms of the New Testament, most of the times we see the word “God,” it is replacing the Greek word, “theós,” which is simply the Greek word for deity. Interestingly enough, it is typically preceded by a form of the Greek definite article ho. Yet again seeming to indicate that it is not meant to be the name of the deity.

Admittedly, this is a relatively recent exploration from me. In most ways, I find it very freeing to recognize that “God” is not in the Bible. It feels much less confining and seems to give “God” a breadth of understanding that is much needed. I’m not saying others shouldn’t use the term “God” in referring to the Christian deity, I’m simply saying that it is not so easy to define and box “God” in when we don’t.

If anything, it should give us permission to play with descriptions of the god of the Universe, to vary how we describe the god of compassion in conversations, to not be so hemmed-in in naming the god who is and ever will be.

For me, it’s not just freeing, it pushes me to consider my understanding of the god who ties us together, in deeper more meaningful terms and that is an incredibly exciting journey to be on.

~ **Rev. Mark Sandlin**

Progressing Spirit February 2018

From: Bishop Spong support@johnshelbyspong.com

Subject: “God” Isn’t in the Bible

Date: 8 February 2018

New research shows religious discrimination is on the rise around the world, including in Australia

[Nicholas Aroney, The University of Queensland](#)

August 6, 2020

There is a theory that despite all the [commotion](#), religious freedom faces no significant threat in Western democracies like Australia. Therefore, the argument goes, [we do not need](#) a federal Religious Discrimination Act.

A major international study challenges this idea. Bar-Ilan University's [Jonathan Fox](#) has undertaken a painstaking analysis of the incidence of religious discrimination around the world. His analysis is based on the most detailed and comprehensive data set on the topic ever compiled.

Fox, a professor of religion and politics, recently published the results in a [new book](#), *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me*. His conclusions are startling. They are also very concerning. And Australia is not exempt from his penetrating analysis.

Fox writes that while many assume the liberal democracies of the West are the strongest bastions of religious freedom in the world, the evidence simply does not support this claim.

For a start, he points out Western democracies such as France, Germany and Switzerland engage in more government-based religious discrimination than many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

He also singles out Australia as a clear example of the recent rise of "socially-based" discrimination against religious minorities in Western democracies, especially against Jews and Muslims. Jews in particular have been the victims of literally hundreds of instances of vandalism, harassment and threats of violence reported each year. Last November, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry [similarly warned](#) of a steep rise in anti-Semitic incidents in Australia.

Religious discrimination is growing

Fox bases his conclusions on a data set recording the treatment of 771 religious minorities in 183 countries between 1990 and 2014.

The data set distinguishes 35 types of government-based religious discrimination. These include restrictions on the construction of religious buildings, controls on religious literature and prohibitions on chaplaincy services in prisons. He found that in 162 countries, government-based religious discrimination was perpetrated against 574 of the minorities at some point during the study period.

Fox also found the prevalence of all these types of government discrimination increased globally by almost 25% over the study period.

The data set also identifies 27 types of socially-based religious discrimination. These include discrimination in employment, vandalism of places of worship, harassment on public transport and outright violence. Jews are the minority most likely to suffer from these sorts of discrimination, but religious minorities of all kinds are subjected to it in particular countries.

From 1990 to 2014, the prevalence of social discrimination increased globally by almost 30%. Outright violence, which is the most shocking form of social discrimination, tragically increased by more than 50%.

What is causing this?

Fox says it is difficult to identify the underlying causes because there are multiple, crosscutting factors. And these play out differently from one country to another. In Western democracies, he identifies several causes, such as fear of Islamic terrorism and outright anti-semitism.

Increasingly, particular religious groups are also being singled out as supposed cults. These include Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Hasidic Jews, Seventh-day Adventists and Pentecostals. Belgium, France and Germany all have explicit anti-cult policies.

Secularist policies are also increasingly being adopted by Western governments which place religious believers under mounting restrictions and regulations, such as controls on [religious dress](#) or restrictions on [religious speech](#).

Which states discriminate? Who is at risk?

Fox says it is important to identify which types of states are most likely to engage in religious discrimination, and which minorities in those states are most likely to be subjected to it.

While it appears that Muslim-majority states on average engage in the highest levels of government-based religious discrimination, there is also a wide diversity. There is a cluster of Muslim-majority states in West Africa that are among the most tolerant in the world.

Among Christian-majority states, the data suggests it is important to distinguish between Christian Orthodox-majority states and the others.

Orthodox-majority states are the second most likely type of state to engage in government-based religious discrimination. Catholic and Protestant-majority states are much less likely to do so. Fox speculates one cause of this may be developments in particular strands of Protestant and Catholic thought that are strongly supportive of religious freedom.

Ideology plays a strong role in causing government-based religious discrimination. However, it is not just religious ideology. Secular ideologies are very capable of causing religious discrimination, too. This largely explains why Western democracies are not the paragons of virtue we readily assume them to be.

As Fox puts it, "thou shalt have no other gods before me" is still practised by many governments across the world. But to be clear, the "god" who will tolerate no competition is "often a secular one, or the state itself".

Secularism and discrimination

Fox argues it is important to distinguish between types of secularism. Some secular states are relatively neutral and tolerant towards religion. But others are anti-religious and have a tendency to restrict religious expression, sometimes very repressively. However, these two types of secularism don't come in neat packages. There is a sliding scale and every Western democracy exhibits characteristics of both.

Many democratic states with officially neutral religious policies may still be influenced by secularist ideologies. And these can motivate the state to be intolerant of religious practices and religious speech.

For these and other reasons, there is more government-based religious discrimination in secular Western democracies than in many of their Asian, African and Latin American counterparts.

The threat in Australia is real

Fox's analysis helps to explain why threats to religious freedom in Australia are very real. Elements of anti-religious hostility are already present in this country and manifest from time to time, especially in socially-based religious discrimination such as [harassment](#), [vandalism](#) and [threats of violence](#).

And, as Fox shows, government-based discrimination can develop, even in secular societies. This is especially when a religious minority is seen as a threat. Or its practices are deemed incompatible with the dominant ideology.

Fox's research highlights why an Australian Religious Discrimination Act is [needed](#), to help address these issues in a principled manner, premised on the standards articulated in the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

The Morrison government says it is still proposing to introduce a religious discrimination bill, even if progress has [stalled due to COVID-19](#). This cannot be something that conveniently falls off the to-do list because of the pandemic.

Religious discrimination is a reality in Australia. Fox's work warns us it is a reality that is not going away anytime soon.

[Read more: New research shows prejudice still high in Australia, but many people seeking to promote social inclusion](#)

Survey finds that Muslims are increasingly liberal and oppose violence

On The Religion and Ethics Report with Andrew West

A major survey of Muslims in Australia shows the community is increasingly liberal, strongly opposed to violence and warm towards Australian values.

[Download Survey finds that Muslims are increasingly liberal and oppose violence \(7.93 MB\)](#)

Last week we discussed the Saudi government's effort to export hard-line Islam to Muslim communities around the world. But if Australia's any example, they're wasting their money.

A major survey of Muslims here shows the community is increasingly liberal, strongly opposed to violence and warm towards Australian values.

Eighty-seven percent are happy and confident, 92 percent enjoy having non-Muslim friends and workmates.

One of the authors of the study is Associate Professor [Halim Rane](#) from Griffith University.

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/religionandethicsreport/>

Strategic planning 2021 – information for Members

1. We recognise that 2020 has brought substantial changes for PCNV.

- After March the pandemic made it impossible to hold meetings in person.
- Zoom meetings have been well received to date with significantly more participants than at meetings in person last year.
- Zoom meeting made it possible to provide a speaker in Auckland.
- Zoom meetings have been offered without a charge which facilitated access but also reduced income.
- The Committee has met by Zoom as often as in recent years and functioned satisfactorily.
- A new website by a professional designer has significantly improved ease of access, provision for diverse contents, and appearance. The development process is continuing to provide for online application for membership, online payment of annual member fees, access to program videos, a link to a PCNV Facebook page and a contract to manage the website to ensure efficient updates. The cost of the initial design was provided in a contract but some further development costs are not yet final and will be influenced by Committee decisions.

2. The Committee has decided to consider during 2021 making substantial changes to how PCNV functions:

- How best to continue the advantages of public meetings by Zoom while also providing some opportunities for people who like group interaction to meet in person.
- How best to provide stimulus and support for the very different members who make up the Network – which by definition does not assume agreement on social issues, practical spirituality or beliefs.
- Review the basis for an income sufficient to ensure PCNV can function to achieve its basic purposes if there are no or few charges for participation in events. This will include a review of membership fees.
- Consider a more substantial focus on communication both using the new website and Facebook page and to promote awareness of our refreshed online presence. Intrinsic to such consideration must be sourcing the skills required for more effective communication.

3. For the immediate future, the Committee notes:

- The organisation has sufficient funds to cover any expenses likely to be needed in the short term for the kinds of changes indicated in 2. above and funds beyond that to support further ways to pursue the purposes of PCNV.
- Recognising income will be lower than in past years due to the removal of fees for admission to some or all events, the Committee recommends that at this time there be no changes to membership fees.
- The fees associated with membership are an expression of support for the important purposes of PCNV. Members make possible the existence of PCNV and the programs that carry forward its mission.

*“Loneliness means having some people to do things with
but no-one to do nothing with”*

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

FORESTS, FAITH & THE FRONTLINE: Why the Cosmic Christ is calling you to stand up for Creation with Rev Alex Sangster

Sunday February 28 @ 4:00pm - 5:00 pm

JOIN PCNV ZOOM MEETING by clicking on the link below just before from 3:50 pm

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87344906739?pwd=aFpEdzNlId2NNRHhINUQ2WXNBYnZ0UT09>

Meeting ID: 873 4490 6739 Passcode: 643853

Feel free to invite other interested friends



We know that climate change is proving to be the defining challenge for humanity and that preserving forests and wilderness is essential.

We also know that people of faith, can offer leadership, inspiration and solidarity in this space. Join Rev Sangster as she reflects on what it means to hold sacred her ordination vows by engaging in prophetic action.

As a member of Greenfaith Australia, Alex has participated in and facilitated many acts of public prayer based rituals, which have combined the use of symbol, word and deed.

Care for creation is not an optional extra for people of faith, it is at the heart of who we are called to be.

Rev Alex Sangster is the minister at Fairfield Uniting Church in Melbourne. She is a dynamic worship leader and preacher with a particular interest in Eco-theology. She is also the author of **Mystic Bible**, a theologically progressive Gospel for children.

