



When 'no religion' is the new normal

The situation for religion in Australia is dire. The National Church Life Survey recently reported that only 4 in 10 Australians agree the Christian religion is good for society. Four in 10 are neutral or unsure and only two in 10 disagree. (Pepper M. and Powell, R, 2016 *Australian Community Survey*. Computer file. Sydney: NCLS Research),

A recent analysis of the 2016 Australian census data shows that those declaring that they have 'no religion' increased to just over 30% and are the most numerous category, more numerous than Catholics in every age group till 65+. (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census)

Professor Gary Bouma, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Monash University, (who will be a PCNV speaker on 25 November) recently wrote, "Quite simply having 'no religion' is becoming the new normal in Australia. This has profound effects in many ways that are just becoming apparent. Among them is the fact that increasingly those who do have a religion are the ones who stand out, who now are 'not normal' and need to explain themselves. The need to explain shoe, is now on the other foot." (*ABC Religion and Ethics*)

For several decades now PCNV and organisations like ours have worked to show that traditional belief systems were shaped by assumptions in their day that do not apply for many people in our day. That adaptation process has been the focus of progressive movements across the western world. It has removed a burden of 'unbelievable religion' from many involved in traditional churches. What is just now becoming clearer is that, with some exceptions, it does not address the issues of meaning and spirituality for people who do not start with religious assumptions.

That is a new challenge for a progressive Christian movement.

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REPORTS OF RECENT MEETINGS

April 27: Michael Morwood, “A New Template for Progressive Christian Prayer”.

Michael began by reminding us that Christian theology and beliefs were constructed on literalising two myths: the myth that humanity emerged in a state of paradise and ruined the perfect state by an original sin that meant we needed a Saviour, and the myth that Jesus became the “Christ”, God’s anointed Lord and Saviour of the world, mediator between God and humans.

Some features of those myths have been indelibly imprinted on Christian imagination, particularly that God lives “elsewhere” so prayer is directed to “heaven” and that God listens to prayers and decides how to answer.

He quoted from his book, *Prayers for Progressive Christians*:

“Twenty-first century followers of Jesus of Nazareth deserve better than prayers based on an outdated redemptive worldview that has been, and still is that Jesus was the “Christ” – God’s anointed Lord - perpetuated by the Christ-religion. Week after week, year after year, liturgical prayers and scriptural readings reveal a heavy bias in favor of the savior “Christ”. The human reality of Jesus, whose life and teaching revealed the good news of God-here-with-us in the ups and downs of life, is overshadowed by the redeeming Christ story. This story is retained by institutional leadership who steadfastly use it to claim exclusive access to the God in heaven and to exercise unquestionable power and authority over their adherents.”

To help us pray:

- Acknowledge a Great Mystery – always, everywhere present and active. -
- Stop praying to a listening deity
- Call upon the power of that Presence within and among us
- Stop using ‘worship’
- Be grateful, appreciative.

May 27: Rev Dr Coralie Ling, “Widening our Horizons: Eco feminists reinterpret Christianity in light of climate change”.

In her highly pertinent presentation, Rev Dr Coralie Ling shared with us some of the varied ways that women are re-interpreting traditional Christian doctrine to address climate change.

We heard how Icelandic theologian, Amfridur Gudmundsdottir, considers it crucial for theology to see sin, repentance and salvation as not just to do with the individual, but to do with social structures, with social responsibility and solidarity with the rest of creation, if the serious consequences of climate change are to be addressed.

South Korean theologian, Meehyun Chung, also saw the need to transform the understanding of salvation to open up the possibility of a life-centred spirituality that would overcome systemic evils of dominance, oppression, exclusivism and injustice, and promote advocacy for both the marginalised and nature.

American theologian, Sallie McFague, tackles the Western theology and philosophy that presents ‘man’ as the thinking individual able to rule this planet. McFague’s Kenotic theology proposes re-imagining the dominant worldview (i.e. planetary capitalism) to see with other forms of life. She re-envisioned the Trinity metaphor as a cycle of giving and receiving – an empowering, relational cycle of mutual flourishing rather than the ‘power over’ images of the traditional view of God as all powerful Lord and King.

American Theologian, Barbara Rossing, wants us to re-imagine the eschaton to enable us to cross from being at crisis point with regard to climate change to a bridge of healing. Rossing points to the picture in Revelation of the new creation with the healing leaves of the tree of life. An eschatological imagination can see beauty and healing, and imagine our future in healing the planet, and move toward it.

-Report by Rev Dr Julie Hall

June 24: Professor David Tacey, “Return of the Sacred and Religion Inspired Terrorism”

“We live in a world that is gripped by terror, and no-one feels safe anymore given the global spectre and the fear that exists in all of us. We are now trying to understand the world that we are in, and in the spirit of this I want to do something experimental and different. ... I want to put forward the proposition that there is more going on with the in-breaking of terror than first meets the eye.” ...

“There are signs that the sacred is returning. After a long period of dryness brought about by secular materialism, there are signs that the sacred is coming back. Ironically, science and philosophy, which were key players in getting rid of the sacred not long ago, seem to be leading the charge. New physics, biology, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics and ecology are showing signs of openness to the sacred. There is also a mystical sense emerging in psychoanalysis, psychology and counselling. In Australia, we find a strong spiritual element in the arts, music, painting and Aboriginal cultures. I have explored the ‘spiritual turn’ in several fields. We see a grassroots upwelling of spiritual interest in the community, especially in young people and popular culture. Sociologists have announced that we are living in a post-secular age, and intellectuals are consulting leaders of religion about ‘what is missing’ in society. A further irony is that although the ball is in the religious court, religion doesn’t know it yet. The religions are still in defensive mode, a stance they have adopted since the eighteenth century.”

“One might have hoped that the return of the sacred would be greeted with joy and relief, but not so. I have looked forward to a ‘prodigal son’ type of scenario, in which the leaders of society would celebrate the return of the sacred, which has been alienated from Western culture for centuries. Our world has grown so far from the sacred, that any approach of this reality to us is experienced as terrifying. Not only has our resistance turned the sacred into a hostile force, but the sacred shows its negative face.”

“Our inner and outer lives have a certain similitude at this time, and few have pointed to this synchronicity – because the prevailing

voices are secular and do not look beyond appearances. It takes a symbolic attitude to read the signs of the times for their deeper significance. Synchronicity is an acausal connecting principle; I am not saying that the changes are *causing* terrorism, only that there is a meaningful parallelism.” ...

“Or, is it the soul turning against us? Perhaps it is not so much that God becomes evil, but that the inward figure in our being, the soul, becomes malign when we fail to connect with the divine. The soul is the ‘third’ thing between humanity and divinity. When we neglect to attend to this relation, the soul as the organ of mediation turns awry and tries to break down our resistance.”
-Extracts from Professor Tacey’s address

July 20 – 21: Professor Joe Bessler, “Justice With or Without God: The Priorities of Progressive Theology, Five lectures over Friday evening and Saturday.

In this series Professor Bessler focussed on how theology can help lay people effect change, renew and grow.

“If progressives are going to reimagine the task of theology, we first need to understand how and why the basic topics of theology fit together the way they do. Because many of us grew up with a more traditional Christian theology, we’ll first review how classical theology works, but we’ll immediately contrast it with more contemporary models.”

The religious/theological and political domains overlap. So is it possible to gather people to decide

- 1) what it means to belong together, and
- 2) how to relate to those outside, beyond the borders?

Examples of such movements include civil rights, black liberation; feminist, LGBTI and post-colonial theologies.

Among Progressives, these movements have tended to replace the classical doctrines of eternal salvation.

Professor Bessler used a model from Bill Clinton's 1992 Convention Speech – the five parts.

1. Created goodness.
2. Fall.
3. New covenant.
4. New community
5. The future

What would it mean to think of the discourses of both religion AND politics as being sacred?

Being progressive is to rethink our ideas of God, ourselves, society and the world.

Another example used by Professor Bessler was Gretta Vosper's With or Without God (2008) that critiques the church.

On the five-point approach it goes like this:

1. Humans have a spiritual dimension to seek and explore, even to a point of not knowing.
2. Problem: the Church rejects the call for change and development.
3. Covenant: the church makes heretics of those who challenge.
4. Community: The rejected heretics form a community, looking to the rebirth, renewal of 'church', the sacred community.
5. Future: a new church will be suspicious of assumptions/certainty.

Through the lectures Professor Bessler outlined classical theology, an alternative theology using the fivepoint approach above, ways of thinking about God, and how to put the model into action.

-Report from Lorna Henry

PCNV MEMBER SURVEY

In March the PCNV Committee decided to follow up suggestions from the Gathering of Members associated with the Annual General Meeting in November. The particular purpose was to assess interest in becoming involved in the development of new activities by PCNV. It was decided to use the online program SurveyMonkey

which allows responses to be made online and provides PCNV with automatic analysis of the responses.

Looking back it would probably have improved the response rate if an email had advised members that the survey was coming and that it was PCNV contacting them using the SurveyMonkey website.

As it was, 47 members provided responses to **four questions about taking action on social issues** (How to improve support for asylum seekers, Implications of the new law to permit Voluntary Assisted Dying, Helping a local church to take account of progressive thinking and practice, and Realistic possibilities for the future of the church) **one question on new forms of monthly meeting**, and **two questions on new opportunities for learning** (a short series of monthly groups about selected scholars of progressive Christianity, and a short series of monthly meetings to discuss 'what being Christian means for you').

'YES' responses mainly numbered 13 to 17, 'NO' responses were 12 to 26, and 'NOT SURE' responses were mainly 14 to 15.

Anecdotal evidence suggests 'NO' responses were due to already being involved in the suggested activity or finding travel and involvement in activities difficult. 'NOT SURE' responses were influenced by not knowing where any suggested activity would be based (PCNV members are spread across Melbourne and in regional towns east and west of Melbourne).

The Committee decided that the responses did not warrant the time and effort to initiate any of the suggested developments at this stage. As will be seen in the program for the second part of 2018, some of the suggested topics have been included in the program.

BEYONDERING

On May 21 Beyondering announced that Season 2 Episode 7 is available as a podcast or through the Beyondering website:

<http://beyondering.com.au/episode-2-7-shaia/>

COMING PCNV MEETINGS

All meetings are on the fourth Sunday of the month and start at 3.00pm and finish by 5.00pm. The venue is Ewing Memorial Centre of Stonnington Uniting Church, corner of Burke Rd and Coppin St, Malvern East.

Sunday August 26: Progressive Approaches to Faith. An interfaith panel offering an overview of how each faith tradition interacts with contemporary issues and other faiths. See details on the last page of this newsletter.

Sunday September 23: How Scholarship is changing Christianity. Where are you at?

A new video on the findings of Westar Institute scholars (the group who formed The Jesus Seminar) will present a short summary of the findings of scholars. Participants will have two opportunities to select groups to explore further some of the scholarly findings and the difference they can make to our lives.

Sunday October 28: "Voluntary Assisted Dying – Conflicts and Dilemmas".

A panel of presenters will provide guidance about the legislation and practical issues that will arise when someone seeks assisted dying.

Sunday November 25: Professor Gary Bouma, "What does Religious Freedom Mean in Australia?"

Professor Bouma will present some research findings as he helps us think about an increasingly divisive topic in Australia today.

The 2018 AGM will follow this meeting at 4.45pm. All current members will be sent AGM papers well before the meeting.

INCLUSIVE CATHOLICS

Inclusive Catholics meet for inclusive Eucharists on the first and third Sundays of the month at Glen Iris Rd Uniting Church at 5.00pm. More information at:

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

EMERGING CHURCH

Meets on the third Sunday of each month

5.00pm to 6.30pm

at Manningham Uniting Church,
20 Westfield Drive, Doncaster.

Opportunities for music, prayer, contemplation and a shared meal to stimulate and refresh our lives.

Please bring a plate of finger food to share

NEW PCNV WEBSITE

One of the suggestions from the Gathering of Members last November was a radical improvement to the PCNV website. After investigating a range of options, the PCNV Committee has commissioned a professional website developer to design a new website for PCNV that will be more attractive, offer a more functional menu and provide for a wider range of information and resources.

As you will understand, there is a lot of work for the Committee working with the designer to specify what we want the website to do for the progressive Christian movement in Victoria as well as to provide effective services to members and links to progressive Christian websites and resources throughout the world.

We will keep you informed!

The Institute for Spiritual Studies, a ministry of St Peter's Eastern Hill, has announced a 2018 Spring symposium on "**Christianity in the Public Sphere**" on Saturday 22 September, 10.00am to 12.30 pm, featuring Father Rod Bower (Vicar of Gosford, famous for his billboards and author of *Outspoken: Because all justice is social*), Dr Robyn Whitaker of Pilgrim Theological College, and Dr Stephen Duckett of the Grattan Institute.

http://web.stpeters.org.au/iss/2018/iss_2018_02.pdf

UCA AND SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

At the recent meeting of the Assembly, the national council of the Uniting Church in Australia, decisions were made about how the Church should respond to the recent legalisation in Australia of same-sex marriage. The announcement by the President, Dr Deidre Palmer, stated:

‘To honour the diversity of Christian belief among our members, we will hold two equal and distinct statements of belief on marriage.

‘This decision will allow ministers and celebrants in the Uniting Church the freedom to conduct or to refuse to conduct same-gender marriages.

‘The existing statement of belief that “marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of a man and a woman to live together for life” has been retained.

‘A new additional statement of belief has also been adopted.

‘That statement reads “marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life.”

‘What this means is that ministers who, in good conscience, are willing to conduct same-gender marriages are able to do so. This does not compromise the rights of those ministers who, in good conscience, cannot conduct same-gender marriages. They will be able to teach their belief that marriage may only be between a man and a woman, and can continue to use a marriage liturgy that reflects that conviction. ...’

Church Councils will have the right to determine whether marriage services take place on their premises.

CATHOLIC CHURCH OPPOSES DEATH PENALTY

On August 2 the Vatican announced that Pope Francis had changed the Catechism of the Catholic Church about the death penalty, saying it can never be sanctioned because “it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”. The Church “works with determination for its abolition worldwide”.

MUSLIM COLLECTIVE

<https://www.muslimcollective.com/melbourne/>
‘Muslim Collective is unified by our quest to explore Islamic thought and spirituality through progressive, open-hearted conversation and ... Muslim Collective is an incorporated organisation formerly **Muslims for Progressive Values** Australia.’

PCNV co-operated with Muslims for Progressive Values in some interfaith events and has featured speakers at our meetings who have enlarged our understanding of contemporary Islam.

‘The Muslim Collective prides itself on the cultural diversity of the people it represents and the progressive values of equality and social justice that it advocates for.’

‘Muslim Collective is a dynamic Australian faith-based community for progressive thought and social action. We are a diverse and inclusive group that supports and encourages dialogue about the real issues of our time.

‘We envisage a society where all people - regardless of gender, religion, race, culture or sexuality - can contribute to this conversation respectfully. Come and meet others with who you can have real conversations - we have community groups in [Melbourne](#), [Sydney](#), [Brisbane](#) and [Canberra](#).

[The Melbourne Muslim Collective](#)

So let us celebrate the gift of our full humanity – in holiday time and festival time, and work together for a more loving and caring communion with nature and with each other.

And along the way may we take time to pause ... for viewing pelicans in flight, and for smelling roses.

Rarely do we experience the beauty of nature in depth.

Instead we move on to something else, distracted just enough to miss that which is most important and immediate.

- Rex A E Hunt, **Seasons and Self**. Page 171

COMMON DREAMS 2019

The fifth Common Dreams national conference for progressives will be held in Sydney from 11 to 14 July 2019. The title is “Sacred Earth: Original Blessing; Common Home”.

The distinguished international speaker is Matthew Fox and the theme of the conference is based on his twelve principles of Creation Spirituality so that the content of the keynote addresses & the electives will relate to one or more of these principles.

In addition to Matthew Fox who will deliver two major public addresses & an interactive segment, the Common Dreams Committee is negotiating for an eminent indigenous person to co-anchor the conference.

Speakers to present keynote addresses or electives are now being recruited. Prof Norman Habel & Sue Jarrad have agreed to present on aboriginal acknowledgement & reconciliation & will also offer an elective, Prof Elaine Wainwright, David Felten (from Living the Questions who will interview Matthew Fox & give the closing oration), Rev Rod Bower (Anglican Vicar in Gosford renowned for his provocative public statements on progressive social justice issues), & Commissioner Ro Allen (Victorian Commissioner for Gender & Sexuality). Alex Sangster & friends will lead an expanded artistic offering.

The venue is Newington College, a private boys school with excellent facilities for the conference, in Stanmore in Sydney's inner West. The venue is within five minutes' walk of Stanmore railway station which is on the Granville Line four stops from Sydney Central Station & the City Circle. It is also conveniently close to Sydney airport.

Negotiations are in progress to have the College make available some accommodation in the school's boarding house which is a modern facility with excellent rooms. Stanmore House, a Salvation Army conference centre, is also nearby & offers accommodation at very

reasonable rates.

Registrations will open early in 2019. Further information is available on the Common Dreams website - <http://www.commondreams.org.au/> .

Plan a Sydney holiday now and take in this opportunity to gather with a nationwide group of people exploring progressive perspectives on religion and Christianity. Common Dreams conferences are held every three years. The last was in 2016 in Brisbane.

BOOK REVIEWS

John Queripel, Christmas: Myth, Magic and Legend. Morningstar Press, 2018. Paperback 144 pages

John Queripel is a retired Uniting Church minister in NSW with a varied career in congregations and chaplaincies. He is known for his social justice concerns and his scholarly approach to understanding Christianity today. A previous book in 2017, *On the Third Day: Relooking at the Resurrection*, explored the meaning of the New Testament stories about the resurrection of Jesus. His new book explores the meaning for today of the ancient biblical narratives about the birth of Jesus.

The gap between the first century stories and people today is described in stark terms on the book cover:

“A woman, both virgin and mother, a star moving at walking pace relative to the earth, turning, then moving in the contrary direction to all other astronomical objects before stopping over a particular town, a census called by an empire in such fashion that it would throw its normal efficiency into chaos, multitudes of angels declaring a saviour’s birth to shepherds with their flocks in the fields during the dead of winter, a pogrom carried out by a tyrannical leader to rid himself of a peasant child perceived as threat.

Does any of this make sense to us in a modern world? Are these things believable

as literal historical events? If not, do they still have meaning?"

What follows is detail informed by scholarly understanding of the differences between factual writing about what happened and the power of metaphor and myth to convey deep meaning. For many modern readers it will be a new experience to read the chapters that describe conditions in Judea when the gospels were written and which show the very different agendas of the only two New Testament writers who provide more than passing reference to the birth of Jesus.

The chapters guide the reader through the strange world of first century story and myth to an appreciation of the meaning of the stories about Jesus' birth for us today. We may also reflect sadly on the way many churches celebrate Christmas giving prominence to magical stories of a baby but little focus on the transformative life and teachings of the man who gave rise to such stories.

"I believe that in the Christmas story there is a deep truth spoken which moves far beyond the mere literalism of the event. The story tells us that there was something so remarkable about Jesus that it progressively led his contemporaries into an ever-deepening appreciation of him." (Page 143)

For more about other publications by John Queripel see

www.facebook.com/JohnHenryQueripel/

This volume is available from the author queripel@tpg.com.au for \$23 including postage

- Review by David Merritt

Rex A. E. Hunt, Seasons and Self. Discourses on being 'At Home' in Nature. Published by Coventry Press, Bayswater. 2018. Paperback. 264 pages.

The author's introduction to this book starts with a quote from American author and philosopher Sam Keen:

"Whether we continue to talk about God is not so important as whether we retain the sense of wonder which keeps us aware that ours is a holy place."

Rex Hunt has served contemporary (progressive) Christianity well as leader, speaker and author. This is, I think, his seventh published title.

Most of this book (from page 41) is a collection of addresses and sermons which show his distinctive characteristics of good communication, creative imagination and focus on the real world of people and the universe, particularly the environment on planet earth. Most of the book is interpretations of life offered in the context of liturgy. They are the opposite of dogmatic. They are invitations to explore fresh perceptions and experiences.

The first part of the book is a valuable introduction to his focus on naturalism. At a time when the traditional churches seem hopelessly bogged in supernatural religious beliefs, Rex Hunt's clear focus on the natural world as all there is provides a clear and challenging alternative:

"Religious naturalism, the religious orientation which is the matrix for this book, has two central aspects. One is an appreciation of religion with a view that nature can be a focus of religious attention. The other is a naturalist view of how things happen in the world – in which the natural world is all there is, and that nothing other than natural may cause events in the world." Page 19.

The first part of the book should be read as a whole to benefit from the author's vision and perspective. It is a valuable source to stimulate consideration of the nature of religion in the contemporary world. The later addresses and sermons can be read selectively as particular examples of issues and questions for today.

- Review by David Merritt

Available from Coventry Press. RRP \$34.95.

<http://www.coventrypress.com.au>

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

“Progressive Approaches to Faith”

with

Rabbi Kim Ettlinger

Afiq Noor

Rev Alex Sangster

Rabbi Ettlinger was ordained at Hebrew Union College (HUC) in May 2005, where she earned two Master of Arts Degrees, one in Jewish Education and one in Hebrew Letters. In 1997, she was awarded a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Politics, Philosophy and Sociology from Murdoch University in Perth, Australia. After five years at her first congregation, Peninsula Temple Sholom, she joined Temple Beth Israel in 2010.

Muhammad Afiq Bin Mohamad Noor is the Head of Special Project & Shariah at IMAN Research, and he is a founding member and Research Director of Al Shabakkah Al Islamiyah Al Thuratsiyah, a think tank that promotes progressive Islamic discourse and reform of traditional texts. He holds a Bachelor of Law & Shariah and MA in Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh & Ushul) and PhD in Islamic law. He has studied and conducted research in many countries.

Rev Alexandra Sangster is a Minister of the Word with the Uniting Church in Australia, currently at Fairfield UCA. She is a presenter for the schools program with the Jewish Christian Muslim Association and on the Steering Group for activist group LOVE MAKES A WAY. She has worked with the Good Samaritans in their domestic violence work and at various Housing Estates across Melbourne. Alex is passionate about creating connections with the emerging church and those who are spiritually hungry but culturally anti-institution.

In a conversation facilitated by Beyonding’s Lucas Taylor, followed by audience Q&A, they will explore topics such as how they see truth in other religions, how scripture/sacred text is viewed within a progressive framework, how LGBT people are included/empowered in these traditions, what leadership/empowerment of women looks like in these traditions, the role of faith and spirituality in a secular world, what the word ‘God’ means, and more ...

WHEN: Sunday 26 August 2018
3.00pm to 5.00pm

WHERE: Ewing Memorial Centre of Stonnington Uniting Church
Corner of Burke Rd and Coppin St, Malvern East.

PCNV meeting cost is \$7 (\$5 for members)