



## *Finding a new way*

The most common items about religion in newspapers and television tend to be critical of traditional religion – sometimes based on shallow, uninformed understanding of religious traditions whether Christian or Islamic. However the journals of Christian denominations also reflect the variety of ways of understanding Christianity that are a characteristic of our time - and a reason for so many people choosing to be involved in the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria as they look for a new way of being authentically Christian.

The main articles in this edition of the newsletter reflect something of that diversity. In particular, the article by Diarmuid O’Murchu takes us through the substantial biblical and theological reasons for moving away from old familiar language about the “Kingdom of God”. What the language means now is actually in conflict with what Jesus and the Gospel writers would have meant to convey. The challenge is to find a new way of being Christian that is faithful to our biblical heritage. As the troubling story of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian, Giordano Bruno, reminds us, this has been a challenge faced in many previous generations.

## **SUPPORT FOR PROGRESSIVE DISCUSSION GROUPS**

The 43 people from 18 groups who participated in the meeting of representatives of progressive Christian groups on 9 July were enthusiastically involved in local discussion groups. They suggested a range of actions to be considered by PCNV to support groups. Some of the suggestions were:

- **Make a meeting of representatives of groups an annual event** to provide opportunities to exchange ideas and identify needs.
- **Provide guidance on how to start and facilitate new groups** including how to identify potential participants, publicity, good starting topics, readily available books, and suggestions for a leader.
- **Suggest current topics for groups**

- **List resources for groups.** What are groups using and can be recommend that others could use?
- **Update a recommended book list annually** - suitable for group discussion or individual reading.
- **Commission written studies suitable for study groups.**
- **List progressive resources for children.**
- **Recommend useful websites.**
- **Help with marketing PCNV** such as promotional brochures.

The Committee of PCNV will consider these suggestions at its next meeting as part of responding to a fuller report about the meeting on 9 July.

### **I was wrong**

My apologies for giving the name of a speaker incorrectly on the front page of the July Newsletter. The address on Climate Change was by Dr Morag Logan. *Editor.*

## Let's get rid of "The Kingdom of God"

*Diarmuid O'Murchu, a member of the Sacred Heart Missionary Order, and a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, is a social psychologist most of whose working life has been in social ministry. He has worked as a counsellor, in bereavement work, AIDS-HIV counselling, and laterly with homeless people and refugees. The following edited essay is reprinted from his website with permission*

The phrase *Kingdom of God* (or *Kingdom of Heaven* in Matthew's Gospel) occurs over 140 times in the Four Gospels, mainly in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Most of the references allude to words spoken by Jesus himself, and among scholars who question the authenticity of what Jesus did or did not say, many of the statements by Jesus about the Kingdom are considered to be authentic. In other words, these are sayings that can almost certainly be traced back to what the historical Jesus actually said. Moreover, there is also widespread agreement that for Jesus the *Kingdom of God* was a concept of primary and foundational importance, perhaps even the core of the Gospel message.

### What did Jesus Actually mean?

There seems to be a growing consensus among scripture scholars on the *central significance*, for Jesus, of the phenomenon of the Kingdom of God. That much seems very clear. Difficulties arise in trying to discern what precisely Jesus meant by the statement... This is a complex multi-faceted phenomenon, what N.T Wright (1996) calls *a grand narrative*, although he confines the narrative to the biblical themes of exile and restoration (of Israel). The tendency to short-circuit this foundational meaning - of broad scope and complex significance - has bedevilled scholarship for several centuries and is now evoking a greater thoroughness and transparency as we seek to discern the authentic truth(s) of our Christian faith.

The actual historical meaning is further jeopardized by the language we popularly use. In English, the word *Kingdom* is *masculine*, while the Gospels written in Greek use the word *Basileia* which is *feminine*. Scholars assume that Jesus spoke Greek and would probably have used it in debate with Scribes and other intellectuals of the day. However, his home language was *Aramaic*, the language he would have used in his ministerial discourses especially among his followers. In Aramaic, the word Kingdom translates as *Malkuta* which is *feminine*, and in the corresponding written version (Hebrew) is rendered as *Mamlaka* which is also *feminine*. The preponderance of feminine words suggests that Jesus used the word *Kingdom* with a very different meaning from our conventional Western understanding... Even a translation like *New Reign of God* (used by several contemporary scholars) probably does not do justice to the original meaning.

Whereas *Kingdom* denotes royal power and domination, privilege, exclusion and hierarchical control, the feminine versions used by Jesus denote something much more egalitarian, liberating and empowering, a quality of leadership that enables and empowers others to take the next step(s)...

Because Christianity, for much of its history, colluded with kingly power and fortune, often modelling its rules and norms on those of patriarchal kingship, it has taken us several centuries to come to terms with the counter-cultural impact of Jesus, who seems to have rejected forthrightly the kingly conditioning, offering instead a radical alternative characterised by empowerment from the bottom up rather than power from the top down...

### The Frightening Domestication

Things began to go wrong from a fairly early stage. Robert Funk (1996) suggests that the early Christian followers (including the twelve) were so conditioned by the concept of brokerage (laying down conditions) that they largely missed the unconditional giftedness Jesus was

proclaiming and living under the rubric of the new vision.

Next, there followed the long process of ecclesiastical ordering, which already within a few centuries was producing the equation: *the Kingdom = the Church...*

Despite the domestication, and its many articulations, there have been periods in Christian history when the alternative vision of the Kingdom of God blossomed forth – usually not with the approval or blessing of the Church. We note this in the 12-13th centuries when several feminist and ecologically based movements (e.g. the great St Francis) flourished; interestingly, many Church historians describe that period as a *dark age* of the Church. In the 19th century, some liberal German and British theologians tried to retrieve the primacy of the notion of the Kingdom, with limited success. Since about 1960, scholars have progressively reclaimed this priority. Church leadership is still far behind, and many lay people are largely unaware of the significance of this key concept of Christian faith.

### **An Empowering Horizon**

... That Jesus envisioned faith communities to subsequently embody his vision is beyond question, but something akin to Basic Christian Communities, rather than an institutional Church, is probably what he had in mind. Among scholars, the Kingdom of God continues to be a field of intense study and research.

Paradoxically, it does not feature strongly in the formation programs offered either in theology schools or in seminaries. The ambivalence of many centuries still seems to undermine our resolve to follow Jesus more fully. Or it might be natural human reluctance to take on a vision that could lead us to places we'd rather not go!

### **The Language Itself**

To resolve the dilemma of our ambivalence we may need to do something a good deal more drastic: *change the terminology itself*. As several philosophers have indicated throughout the twentieth century, language dictates and limits consciousness. Language controls our lives to a far greater degree than most of us are aware. A new language is often necessary to move us in the direction of new possibilities.

For many years, I have encountered people, particularly women, who find the term *Kingdom of God* alien and oppressive. Many people have never had a direct experience of living under the governance of a king (or queen). And many educated people today readily see the archaic imperialism which inherently belongs to such language and the imagery it begets. Perhaps the time has come – as I indicate in the title – to *get rid of the terminology itself*.

And what would we replace it with? John Dominic Crossan (in Borg 1998, 22-55) offers one of the best suggestions I know: *a companionship of empowerment*. Certainly this is what all the parables are pointing towards. And if we take the miracles as the first signs of the Kingdom happening, then the miracle stories also support this re-naming. It also honours something of the original language used by Jesus, particularly the Aramaic *malkuta*, which literally translates as *the right to rule*, but the underlying connotation (signalled by the feminine word) is that of the power of vision and leadership that empowers others towards a more empowering future.

The *companionship of empowerment* also challenges and transcends the competitive individualism so endemic to our time, and quite alien to the time and culture of Jesus. The empowerment envisaged in the life and ministry of Jesus is that of *setting relationships right*, co-creating communities and networks through which we incarnate transformative justice, healing and forgiveness, empowering love and enduring liberation. The counter-cultural call is not that we look to others to do it for us (the kingly, hierarchical model), but that we mutually empower

each other to do it together - for each other and for the earth we inhabit. This is also the vision of the Beatitudes, the radical option for which Jesus lived and died.

So, let's get rid of the language of the "Kingdom of God." *Delete it from the Gospels*, and replace it with the "Companionship of Empowerment." And let's not wait for scholars or churches to do it for us. We are not destroying tradition, or tampering with sacred writ. Rather, we are seeking to reclaim something closer to the originality and dynamism of what Jesus was onto in the first place, a vision which Christians of every age and culture are invited to embrace. With this new language, and the vision it embodies, Christianity stands a much better chance of becoming once more the *dangerous memory* it was always meant to be.

Reprinted with permission. Read the full unedited essay at: [www.diarmuid13.com/christian-life-essay-2](http://www.diarmuid13.com/christian-life-essay-2)  
These ideas are spelt out at greater length in Diarmuid O'Murchu's new book ***Christianity's Dangerous Memory***, published by Crossroad (NY), Sept.2011.

## A PROGRESSIVE BURNED ALIVE

Morris West was one of Australia's most widely read 20<sup>th</sup>C novelists. When he died in 1999, he was finishing what he hoped would be the novel that expressed the heart of his perspective on the human condition. In his early life, he spent 6 years in training as a Christian Brother before leaving the order. His novels often wrestle with the ambiguities and complexity of religion. His last novel, "The Last Confession", is based on the life of Giordano Bruno, victim of the Holy Roman Inquisition, stripped naked and burned at the stake in Rome on 17 February 1600 for opinions that resonate with 21<sup>st</sup> century progressive Christians.

The novel is told from the perspective of Giordano Bruno during the last weeks of his life. He looks back over years of imprisonment and torture and beyond them to his life, his work and his religious journey. The ideas for which he was condemned do not sound strange to us. "I ask for liberty to think and to explain", "What I see is ... a cosmos expanding to infinities of earths and suns and galaxies of stars beyond our conception. The God who made it is is not a juggler of celestial oranges, dazzling us with spheres in orbit. He is in all things, in us and around us, so that truly in Him we live and move and have our being. Why do they call this a heresy? Why are they set upon burning me for it?"

One of the Inquisitors says to Bruno, "God will never turn away from the penitent sinner. His mercy is infinite". Bruno replies, "Then why do I find so little in His Church?"

'I claimed, they say, that the miracles of Christ were conjuring tricks. In fact, I said something quite different: "Jesus had no need of conjuring tricks. He, himself, was the message and the miracle. Those who recorded his life felt the need to embellish it with wonders. They were mistaken".'

On my third reading of the novel, I was again deeply moved by the integrity of this searcher for truth, by how easily power can corrupt goodness, and by how definitions can distort ultimate mystery. There is a fine statue of Giordano Bruno in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome where Bruno died, erected by the faculty and students of the University of Rome in 1889. The inscription reads: ' *To Giordano Bruno, from the century he guessed at, in Rome, on the place where he was burned*'.

Two of his sayings in this novel stick in my mind: "I was a troubled soul, trying to find a hat to fit his busting brainbox". "God knows, I pray little, but there is one prayer I do make: give me light, give me eyes to see it, give me courage to testify to the vision. Amen."

Morris West, *The Last Confession*. HarperCollins. Sydney. 2000. You will find this novel and his autobiography, *A View from the Ridge. The Testimony of a Pilgrim*, in many libraries.

Review by David Merritt.

## Godless Gross

If you want a stimulating read from a perspective different from your usual Christian perspective, however progressive, but by a thoughtful person with a strong social justice orientation, have a look at the Godless Gross blog:

<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/blog/godless-gross>

As the blurb at the head of his blog site says: “Whether you're a hard core atheist, heretical apostate or just a wishy-washy doubting Thomas, the big human issues of meaning, ritual, belonging, death and suffering still have to be faced. Dick Gross has written and broadcast on these issues from a godless perspective for over a decade. Join him on his blog as he wanders through the big issues of existence without a god to help him”.

A blog earlier this year, “The Devil wears evolution”, May 20, 2011, lamented that atheists don't do a good job about some basic human needs and commended religious progressives.

“Atheism's tragedy can be summarised by these evolutionary flaws. Are these flaws fatal?

1. Bad on death;
2. Hopeless at ritual;
3. Progressive on morality but uncertain and without one-line catch cries;
4. Organisationally minuscule;
5. Underperformers on philanthropy;
6. Weak on assisting those who suffer.”

Dick lamented that the New Atheism movement was no help with their debate about whether God exists. “This stuff drives me batty not only because it is too alienating for most people to tolerate but because it is so intellectually soft. Repudiating religions is too easy. Most believers accept that their venerable beliefs contain some stupid bits. What is more difficult is to wonder about the attractions of faith and try to find alternatives for those who cannot believe.”

“The New Atheists give unbelievers a good feeling inside but are seriously counterproductive. I suggest that atheist groups transform themselves so that those atheists who so choose can insinuate themselves and reside happily in faiths as atheistic Catholics or say, agnostic Hindus or say godless Jews. That is already found in many parts of faith communities. There are many deep-thinking religious leaders who are seeking to transform their faiths to a less magical and more thoughtful place. We need to work with progressives. They are to be found in every faith. To be frank I find thoughtful believers much more inspiring than angry atheists.”

Dick's questions for atheists and humanists at the end of the blog include two that with only slight changes make stimulating questions for progressive Christians:

- How do we meet human needs without belief?
- Should we create alternatives to faith or enter the faiths and transform from within?

Read more: [www.theage.com.au/opinion/blog/godless-gross](http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/blog/godless-gross)

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“The oldest thing you can say about God is that God is always doing something new. Jesus pushed his own religion to newness by including the best of its past, and transcending the worst of its present. He calls us to do the same, whatever our religion is today. Jesus continues to be a prototype for all spiritual paths in their task of keeping up with the Spirit's evolutionary impulse to welcome the next transcendent stage.”

Rev. Paul R Smith of the Broadway Church, Kansas City, Missouri

## IS PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGY HERESY?

A Public Conversation with Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson

Sunday August 21 at 3 pm, Nunawading Uniting Church, 355 Whitehorse Road.

In an open conversation, Rev Drs Paul Tonson and Lorraine Parkinson will explore alternative expressions and emphases of the Christian faith, in relation to her recent publication: *The World According to Jesus ... his blueprint for the best possible world*.

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## CELEBRATING INTERFAITH WITH INTERACTION

Panel Discussion following Sunday Service, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 11.45am.

Where: St Michael's Uniting Church, Waratah Room 120 Collins St.

Members of InterAction, a youth-based interfaith group, will join St Michael's for a panel discussion with Freeman Trebilcock, 21 year-old Buddhist monk and Melbourne University psychology student and chair of InterAction, as well as other members of InterAction with diverse religious backgrounds.

For more information about InterAct, visit <http://www.interaction.org.au/>

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## (RE) BIRTHING STORIES

The Network of Biblical Storytellers Australia

November 18 – 20 at Lake Dewar Lodge, Myrniong, near Bacchus Marsh.

Cost \$300 – 320. Saturday \$150.

Email: [melgage203@netspace.net.au](mailto:melgage203@netspace.net.au)

Blog: <http://ausbiblicalstorytellers.blogspot.com>

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## SEA OF FAITH IN AUSTRALIA

Conference 2011

*Head, Heart, Body and Soul: Religion,*

*Spirituality and the Arts*

9 – 11 September 2011

Brisbane, Queensland

For brochure and registration:

<http://www.sof-in-australia.org>

## Search for Understanding by Durham Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition . Review by Joy Merritt.

Durham Smith, known to many of us, as he is a member of PCNV, has published a second edition of his book, *Search for Understanding*.

He is still addressing the need to re-interpret the traditional doctrines of Christian faith in the light of contemporary scientific worldviews and modern biblical scholarship. Aware however of vast numbers of people with no interest at all in religion, his new book has a new starting point, discussing the values that are accepted by secular society – love, compassion, justice, respect for life – and discussing the origin of these values.

There are also times when new research of the last 5 years has led him to reconsider his views to some extent. In an example relevant to the current debate on same-sex marriage and the issue of having children within such a relationship, he quotes the argument presented in his earlier book, but adds new evidence that 'children are in good hands with loving and committed homosexual relationships' (p 203).

The motivation for Durham Smith's own search remains: that the content of the faith as traditionally presented is out of touch with the realities of the contemporary world and 'simply does not make sense' (p 48). He brings to that search the intellectual rigour of a true scientist, extraordinarily wide reading in many fields including theology, and a deep personal faith. For him the central core of the gospel is the Divine Presence in all people, empowering us to love.

Many of us will find it useful to be able to go to one of its central chapters from time to time, to be encouraged to think in fresh ways about an aspect of traditional Christian faith and practice: the gift of the Spirit, incarnation, atonement and resurrection, prayer, inclusiveness, creation. We may in the process find more scientific information than we are used to processing about cosmology or DNA codes, for example, but those parts are in themselves a useful resource, and always lead to a sense of 'the miracle of life, in all its profundity' (p 214).

Durham Smith's book is a valuable guide for others too in their search for a more meaningful and relevant Christian faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

# The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

## *“What can Progressive Christians Learn from Progressive Jews?”*

with

### **Rabbi Fred Morgan**

**WHEN:** Sunday 28 August 2011.  
3.00pm to 5.00pm

**WHERE:** Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.  
Glen Iris Rd. near the corner with High St (Melway Map 60 A9)  
Parking in church grounds and nearby streets

#### **THE SPEAKER**

Rabbi Fred Morgan, Senior Rabbi, Temple Beth Israel, St Kilda, one of Australia's largest Progressive Synagogues,

Rabbi Fred Morgan is a distinguished and accomplished Jewish scholar, teacher and leader. He came to Temple Beth Israel, one of Australia's largest Progressive Synagogues, in 1997, where he is regarded very highly as teacher, leader and pastor of the people. He grew up in the United States, in New York, before going to England. There he was a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Bristol, England, and spent 14 years as Rabbi of North-West Surrey Synagogue, south of London. He is a graduate of Leo Baeck College in London, where he was made a Fellow in 1997 for his services to teaching. He is also Honorary Associate Rabbi of Sim Shalom Community in Budapest, Hungary.

He is one of the senior leaders in Progressive Judaism in Australia, and regularly speaks at interfaith and Christian events on the history of Judaism and relationships between Christians and Jews.

**Cost** is \$7 (\$5 for members)

*“Open minds, open hearts, open hands”*

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