

# *Touchstone*

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## PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY?

### CONTENTS

**Editorials** ..... 3

### Articles

Making Progress?  
Edwin Searcy ..... 7

Post-Theism and the “Problem” of God  
Peter Wyatt ..... 15

The Christology of John Dominic Crossan—and an Alternative  
Don Schweitzer ..... 25

The Resurrection of Jesus according to “Progressive Christianity”  
Harold Wells ..... 35

Fundamentally Eccentric: Reflections on What It Means to Be Human  
in Our Time  
Robert C. Fennell ..... 44

**From the Heart about the Heart of the Matter**  
Marguerite van Die ..... 51

### Profile

Eunice Pyfrom  
Betsy Anderson ..... 56

**Reviews***Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*

by Eric Metaxas

John McTavish ..... 63

*Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points  
and Divergent Interpretations*

by Terence L. Donaldson

Matthew Thiessen..... 65

*Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*

by Shelly Rambo

Don Schweitzer ..... 67

*Drawing from the Same Well: The St. Brigid Report*

A Report of the Anglican-United Church Dialogue, 2003-2009

Karen Hamilton ..... 69

*Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*

by Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale

Adam Hall ..... 71

## Editorials

### WHAT BUSINESS ARE WE IN?

Recently I have been part of several discussions on the questions famously posed by management guru Peter Drucker: What business are we in? and How's business? Harold Percy, an Anglican minister, author and teacher, put these questions to Halton Presbytery (Hamilton Conference) and they struck a chord with me. In the midst of focus groups on fund raising, new rules on accessibility, training for sexual harassment and racial sensitivity, increasingly complicated police record checks and policy simplification that seems to leave us with a disempowered volunteer base on any aspect of personnel or policy, we need to have a sense of what is important and what we really want and need to be about.

So, in the United Church, what is our business and how is business? What is our vocation and how is it going? If you were a sociologist looking over the pages of the *Observer*, you might come to quite a different conclusion than if you looked over our Year Book. The *Observer* would present you with a variety of hot-button issues within society and culture, while in the Year Book you might think that congregations are actually the heart of the vocation of the United Church. These are not opposites. Indeed, Halton Presbytery spent a couple of hours hearing from congregations about the social ministries that were important to them. It was an eye opener to hear about the passion in local congregations for outreach to youth, migrant agricultural workers, and those suffering from mental illness, poverty and isolation. These projects grew out of deep faith commitment and fellowship.

By any sociological and theological measure, the life of the church is centred in its congregations and its business is done in and by congregations. Making disciples—enabling ourselves and others to be followers of Jesus—is the core business and vocation of the United Church (and not only the United Church), as it exists in thousands of locations and among hundreds of thousands of Canadians. It is here that our business primarily is carried out and where its effectiveness is to be measured.

This measurement is about sharing the deep joy of Christ and the love of God for each person and family, and for all our neighbours near

and far. As a church we are often internally preoccupied and problem-driven. We are focused on program delivery. We are great at seeing the social good of compliance to policy, or remedial education programs for clergy, but not so good at developing the commitment to faith sharing, personal witness and prayer that will be at the heart of any renewal of the religious life of our communities and society.

We are more focused on patching and correcting than in trying to catch the Spirit. Our strategy could more wisely be recognizing opportunity in congregations and ministries, and especially in personal lives that can unleash the transforming power of grace into the streets of Canada. The challenge to presbyteries, conferences and the General Council is to build commitment at every level for the deepening of our life in faith and prayer.

The key question beyond the congregation in the life of the church is: Does our policy and program help build commitment in congregations, ministry personnel and presbyteries for the work of the church? This is a basic stance of trust towards congregations, ministers and presbyteries. It is a stance not of fixing congregations, presbyteries and ministers, but of growing their commitment to following the way of Christ in their ministry and governance.

We don't need another event or article about what faith isn't, or why prayer is problematic. We don't need an endless promise of simplification that delivers more remote oversight and more specificity in process and regulation that hampers effective decision-making. We need to build commitment to service and ministry by developing the wisdom and experience of our leaders. We need mentoring by those who live in such a way that faith has power, and prayer is an offering to God of our joy in, and our hope for, intimacy with God. We need an eldership not of age but of attentiveness to the heart and the spirit, and structures that recognize that this is the heart of the vocation of the church and the heart of its mission.

John Hogman,  
Chair of the Editorial Board

## PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY?

This number of *Touchstone* finds its theme in assessing the contemporary movement known as “Progressive Christianity.” Several threads of inquiry are involved in this assessment. First of all, there is the matter of discerning just what Progressive Christianity is, and of identifying the wide diversity present in its proponents. Many of us think of ourselves as progressive in relating the historic faith to the emergence of new learning and in balancing the importance of belief in the triune God with the summons to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. In the U.S. context, where fundamentalist influence has arrogated to itself the banner of Christian faith, it is common for trinitarian Christians with a social conscience to call themselves progressive.

In Canada, where secularism is more influential than fundamentalism, and many evangelicals possess strong discipleship credentials, things are different. Here we don’t have to be so “on guard” against politicized right-wing theology. And here the phrase “Progressive Christianity” usually is used by those with a radical theological agenda that may be described as anti-theism or post-theism. It often consists of the replacement of theistic faith with trust in the mutuality of human community. Yet, even in Canada, there is diversity among “Progressive Christians.” In our lead article, Ed Searcy guides us in identifying the varied expressions of “Progressive Christianity.”

Other articles in this number deal with specific doctrines or themes that receive critique from a variety of “Progressive Christians.” Don Schweitzer evaluates the christology of John D. Crossan, Harold Wells surveys John Spong, Marcus Borg and Crossan on the resurrection of Jesus, Rob Fennell presents an “eccentric” understanding of human nature, and the editor essays a response to anti-theism and post-theism on the “problem” of God. Rounding out the number are the usual five book reviews, a profile of the unsung Eunice Pyfrom (by Betsy Anderson) and a heart-felt reflection on teaching church history (by Marguerite van Die).

We are privileged to have received permission from the artist, Laura James, to use her art on the cover. “Jesus Walks on Water” is one of thirty-five Ethiopian-inspired, iconographic paintings commissioned by the U.S. Catholic Church as illustrations for its Year 2000 “Book of the

Gospels.” The image of Jesus lifting Peter above the waves speaks eloquently of the dependence of believers on God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

With the appearance of this number, I am looking forward to anticipated future themes:

- May 2012: Christian Spiritual Practices
- September 2012: Is it the End? Christian Faith and the Destiny of Creation
- January 2013: Ecclesiology: The Mission Has a Church!
- May 2013: Atonement: A Family Debate
- September 2013: Preaching
- January 2014: Ecumenism

Our usual procedure is that, following the annual editorial board meeting in May and its refinement of themes and identification of potential authors, many of the articles are then commissioned. However, beginning with the September 2012 number, we are open to submissions on the announced themes. Please be in touch if you have interest in writing on a given theme.

#### APOLOGY

Several of our subscribers received the September 2011 number extraordinarily late this autumn. Our mailing service is the United Church Distribution Centre and the delay began there as staff coped with flooding in the premises. However, all copies were delivered to Canada Post on Oct. 4. The Centre followed up with Canada Post and was told that all subscribers should have received their copies no later than Oct. 28. The fact that some of us received our copies in mid-November startled the Canada Post supervisor. It appears that a high volume of mail in October may have been a factor in the further delay—or maybe some of the copies just got left in a corner of the huge Mississauga plant. In any case, we apologize to our subscribers for the delay in delivery.

Peter Wyatt  
Editor

## **MAKING PROGRESS?**

**by Edwin Searcy**

I've been hearing and reading about Progressive Christianity for the better part of a decade. What I have heard and read has not grabbed me. I grew up in the 1960s when the United Church of my youth was seeking to be a progressive church. I remember the great controversy over the New Curriculum that was intended to be an up-to-date, progressive Sunday School resource. I remember, too, the progressive politics of my father and many other United Church ministers like him. We cheered for the NDP on election nights. This was, as Dad believed, gospel politics. Now, three decades into the life of an ordained minister of the United Church, I have spent much of my ministry in re-discovery of Scripture and tradition as crucial components in the formation of Christian identity. In the process, my reading of the claims made for Progressive Christianity by its supporters has not been hopeful. Have I been guilty of breaking the ninth commandment by bearing false witness? Perhaps I have. So, when I noticed that a local United Church congregation invites those who visit its website to explore Progressive Christianity, I decided to put down my hermeneutic of suspicion and to take up the invitation. Perhaps this movement is not the enemy that I often imagine. Perhaps, instead, it is the visit of a holy guest akin to those who arrive at Abraham and Sarah's table. Since I trust in a God who is providential, might God be providing good news in this distinctive expression of Christianity?

Progressive Christianity is diverse. I followed the link and was taken to that modern day repository of knowledge known as Wikipedia, where I learned that this movement is: "characterized by willingness to question tradition, acceptance of human diversity with a strong emphasis on social justice or care for the poor and the oppressed and environmental stewardship of the Earth."<sup>1</sup> Reading further, I discovered an extraordinary list of "Notable Progressive Christians." There I learned that theologians as diverse as Martin Luther King Jr., Tony Campolo, Gretta Vosper, Jay Bakker, Bono and Walter Brueggemann are all considered progressive Christians. Knowing something of the diversity of theology represented by this group, I wondered how they all fit under the same umbrella. Campolo clearly considers himself to be an evangelical. Brueggemann

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive\\_Christianity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Christianity), December 2011.

tells his students that he owes a huge debt to Karl Barth. Vosper's recent book argues for the abandonment of belief in the transcendence of God, debunking divinity in order to focus on ethics.<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia's taxonomy of a progressive Christian focuses not on the theological location of the individual but, rather, on their social and political witness. They are Progressives politically. But is this what makes for Progressive Christianity? If so, there are many Catholics and Orthodox who would also fit under this broad umbrella.

Continuing my pilgrimage, I visited the home sites of the North American versions of Progressive Christianity. Here, again, I discovered diversity. Both the U.S. based "Center for Progressive Christianity" and its Canadian counter-part, "The Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity," feature eight points of belief. Both sets of eight fundamentals, for want of a better word, highlight the intention of progressive Christians to be inclusive of all people, to live compassionately and to seek social justice. The difference between these two national expressions seems to reside in their relative comfort level with speaking of Jesus. Neither of the eight point manifestos mentions God. However, the American version of Progressive Christianity does affirm the path and teachings of Jesus, but only as "one of many ways to experience of the Sacredness and Oneness of life . . ."<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Centre does not mention Jesus in its eight identifiers. It does state that progressive Christians "engage in a search that has roots in our Christian heritage and tradition" before it calls its adherents to "embrace the freedom and responsibility to examine traditionally held Christian beliefs and practices, acknowledging the human construction of religion, and in the light of conscience and contemporary learning, adjust our views and practices accordingly."<sup>4</sup>

My exploration continued. In her book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle names The Phoenix Affirmations to be the most helpful presentation of Progressive Christianity to date.<sup>5</sup> Drafted by a group of clergy and laity from Phoenix, Arizona, these twelve principles continue

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<sup>2</sup> Gretta Vosper, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tpc.org/about/8points.cfm>, December 2011.

<sup>4</sup> [http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page\\_id=6](http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page_id=6), December 2011.

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix\\_Affirmations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_Affirmations), December 2011.

to be amended (the current set being labelled version 3.8). Divided into three sets of four statements each, the Phoenix Affirmations name what the Christian love (1) of God, (2) of Neighbour and (3) of Self includes. This outline has resonance with Diana Butler Bass's search to undergird new expressions of Christianity, which are not explicitly evangelical or orthodox, with an untold history. She glimpses something coming to birth in the midst of the apparent demise of much of mainline Christianity:

Scholars and observers have been struggling with a name for this rebirth: *emerging, progressive, practicing, intentional, neotraditional, new paradigm, postmodern, postliberal, postdenominational, postpartisan and transformational Christianity* are all terms used to describe the renewal of mainline and liberal churches and the creation of alternative forms of community (such as house churches and online churches).<sup>6</sup>

In tracing the arc of Christian history that she sees re-emerging, Butler Bass calls this "Great Command Christianity," grounded in Jesus' command to love God and to love neighbour. She says that, "unlike formalized church tradition, something that often appears as an approved list of what to believe and how to act, this is open-ended history. Great Command Christianity invites us to participate in a living tradition, to reconsider faith as a community of people who practice God's love and mercy through time."<sup>7</sup> Like the Phoenix Affirmations, Butler Bass expresses a liberal Christianity that is widely shared in The United Church of Canada.

Back on the northern side of the forty-ninth parallel, it is worth noting that the two best known Canadian advocates for Progressive Christianity are United Church ministers.<sup>8</sup> Gretta Vosper is the founder and past chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, whose board is comprised largely of United Church members. In defining Progressive Christianity, Vosper writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 316.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Todd, "*Progressive Christians duke it out in print*," <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/story.html?id=74718ffc-1707-492b-8447-14fa5dd499fa>, April 26, 2008.

. . . The definition of progressive Christianity is a difficult one to make. Any community that pulls itself outside of its own worldview to question its purpose, its practice, its foundations, and its beliefs will be challenged by what it finds. Working through the reality of that challenge will eventually cause it to reject one thing (or many things) in exchange for something else. Whether it be an understanding of what is just, a belief in a theistic God, or a way of creating a welcoming environment, the communities that employ the elements of progressive thinking, openness, creativity, passion, intellectual rigour, honesty, courage, balance and respect, will see themselves progress along that endless continuum of what Christianity can be. Progressive Christianity cannot be nailed down to one thing. It lives in flux. It always will because that is its nature. It always will because it must.<sup>9</sup>

While Vosper's version of Progressive Christianity has taken her beyond theistic belief in God, she argues that the reason for wide diversity of expression within the movement lies in the very nature of progression.

The other noted Canadian proponent, albeit on a distinctive basis, is Bruce Sanguin. Canadian Memorial United Church in Vancouver, where he serves, invites newcomers to join them in this way: "Are you seeking an open-hearted and open-minded community to explore the meaning of life? We are an inclusive, dogma-free church that supports the radical exploration of Christianity and your personal spiritual journey. We call this distinctive exploration Evolutionary Christian Spirituality."<sup>10</sup>

While Vosper is eager to shed explicit Christian language in her pursuit of progress, Sanguin's congregation describes its progress as an expanding, evolving understanding of that language:

God is present in the historical unfolding, calling "Her/His" people to go, set out, and to leave behind the security of present circumstances to help realize a sacred future . . . While it is not explicit, we think that there is an evolutionary intuition reflected in many of Jesus' teachings and Paul's theology . . . From an

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<sup>9</sup> [http://grettavosper.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=32&Itemid=9](http://grettavosper.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=32&Itemid=9), December 2011.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.canadianmemorial.org>, December 2011.

integral or evolutionary worldview Jesus . . . is the embodiment of the sacred evolutionary impulse itself—one who has consented in absolute fashion to giving his life in sacrificial devotion to the emergence of the new thing God is doing—what he called the Kin(g)dom of God. At this stage, he is regarded once more as fully divine and fully human.<sup>11</sup>

In keeping with his conviction that a progressive Christianity makes imaginative use of the tradition, Sanguin regularly preaches sermons that take their starting point in Scripture as appointed in the Common Lectionary. Using an evolutionary hermeneutic, the sermons are thought-experiments in an emerging, not yet fully realized, Evolutionary Christianity.

What to make of this exploration of Progressive Christianity? It is not clear what new form of the church may emerge from this experiment. That there is energy for being the church, for being Christian, for living the Great Command, is no small thing. But is this newfound energy a gift of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or is it driven more by the spirit of the age? I am hesitant to be too bold in answering this question. Throughout my ministry, I have been aware of the ways in which Progressive Christianity seems to reflect the spirit of the age. I have met many lay people who are excited to have discovered what is “newest in theology.” In an age which places extraordinary trust in the benefits of the newest technology, there is danger in trusting that a theology will carry us safely through the storm simply because it is new. Yet Christianity is a future-oriented faith in which we too often spend our time looking in the rear-view mirror at what was, rather than searching the horizon for what lies ahead. At the heart of the gospel is the conviction that history is moving towards the Kingdom of God, or, more accurately, that the Kingdom of God is moving toward us. To the extent that Progressive Christianity points to this future orientation, it reminds the church that we are pilgrims on a journey toward the justice that comes from divine judgment and to the mercy that is the gift of God’s amazing grace.

My hesitancy in coming too quickly to a negative judgment about the value of Progressive Christianity also may derive from the discovery that my body is now progressing toward its end. While that is always true

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.canadianmemorial.org/about/evolutionary-christianity>, December 2011.

for all of us, the recent diagnosis of multiple myeloma has resulted in further progress of my soul along its earthly pilgrimage. I see familiar faces, lives, ideas and concerns through a new lens. I am more curious than I have been, more open to other possibilities, ready to be taught rather than to teach. At the same time, I find myself listening intently for a gospel word addressed to my mortal condition.

As a contemporary offshoot of the taproot known as the social gospel, Progressive Christianity is a crucial voice in the church's conversation. Yet, the social gospel is not restricted to those bearing the brand name "Progressive Christian," for the social dimension of Christianity is a common thread within Progressive Christianity. Any contemporary, lived witness to the Christian gospel that is worth its salt will speak and act with courage against injustice and oppression. Too much of what passes for "spirituality" in today's marketplace—both within and without the church—is mute when it comes to the prophetic calling to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. My own journey this past year has brought me under the tender care of a haematologist who was raised on a farm in Libya. An immigrant to Canada, a Muslim by faith, he is a brilliant and caring man who is tending me through my trials and tribulations. Through it all, I am a recipient of the benefits of a medical system imagined by forbears in the social gospel, the cost of my care being shared by all Canadians. The ethic held dear and found compelling by Progressive Christianity is wonderfully expressed in the care that I am receiving.

And yet. And yet there is something crucial that is missing for me in Progressive Christianity. A lifetime in ministry has taught me that the social gospel also must be deeply personal. If the evangelical church has too often ignored the gospel's call to society, then the liberal church, of which Progressive Christianity is an heir, has regularly ignored the difficult personal journey that the Bible describes as confession, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, leading to redemption. In its enthusiasm for finding new ways of living the Christian life, Progressive Christianity drops the narrative of sin and salvation. But a pastor who pays attention soon discovers that every household and every neighbourhood is immersed in this troubling yet life-giving plot. No wonder that Twelve Step groups multiply in the church basement during

the week while the mainline church living above it struggles Sunday by Sunday. Twelve Step groups know that sobriety is a matter of life and death. They know that conversion to a new way of life is only possible when the addicted are prepared to give their lives over to a Higher Power. When Christianity is reduced to the Great Commandment it becomes a wise life, a good life, a life that is in our control—if we will only do as we ought. But what if one can no longer do what one ought? What is gospel then?

And what is gospel when the doctor tells you that your time is running out? I live on the west coast of Canada where death, like sin, goes largely unspoken. When death occurs, it has become a time not for funerals but for “celebrations of life,” gatherings that look back at memories of what has been because there is little promise of life to come. This, the culture assumes, is progress. Progressive Christianity, as it is currently articulated, speaks boldly neither to a culture that is afraid of death, nor to people who find themselves or their loved ones dying. The biblical language of lament and sorrow leading to the impossibly good news of life and joy on the other side is deemed archaic. The narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection seems more an embarrassment than inexplicable, good news of great joy.

It leaves me wondering at what point Christian faith slides into something else. When does the pursuit of the sacred out ahead no longer look like the search for the God met in Jesus Christ? Should Christian faith be defined by the present feelings of members of the contemporary church? Does the community form Christian faith, or is the church called out from society to be something that it did not (and does not) invent? Can we really “reinvent” Christianity? My witness has leaned into the formative power of Christian Scripture and tradition to shape a faithful church and away from the supposed need to be liberated from Christian dogma and doctrine. But I recognize that the court room in which such witness is given will hear a variety of truth-tellers before coming to its conclusions.

Progressive Christianity, like the liberal theology from which it springs, is worried that the church’s tradition has become an idol. It fears that we will not spot God reaching towards us from the future because we are so busy looking back at the God met in the past. At the same time, like

liberal theology, Progressive Christianity can too easily abandon precious truth in its eagerness to keep up with the times. Knowing what of the new is of the God, whom our ancestors met in the Law and the Prophets, as well as in the One born in a manger and hung on a cross, is never as easy as we would like. Prophets and prophetic movements are regularly ignored and persecuted in their time, unwelcome in their home towns. Sorting out the wheat from the chaff in Progressive Christianity, as in any emergent movement in the church, takes place over time as the fruits of its witness become known. Is this a dead end or a new beginning? On this side of the Kingdom, the answer is not as clear as we would wish. As Paul says, “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Readers of a journal named *Touchstone* are well situated for the difficult but crucial work of distinguishing the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst from the spirit of the age (and of discerning when the Holy Spirit is at work in the spirit of the age). It was a surprise to me when I learned the origin of the word “touchstone.” A touchstone is not a precious mineral. Its value does not lie in what it is, but in what it discloses. The touchstone’s value comes when the prospector discovers something that is, by all appearances, surely gold. How to know that it is not fool’s gold, a fake, a fraud? Only by rubbing the rock across the touchstone to see if it makes the dependable mark that tells one and all: gold.

As we dialogue with those who claim that Progressive Christianity is the gold that we are together seeking, a sign of the future God has long promised, we will do well to continue to carry with us the touchstone of Scripture and tradition that has been passed on to us. Scripture and tradition do not constitute the presence of God. But they also are not weights to be discarded or prisons from which we need to be freed. The priceless value of Scripture and tradition lies in their capacity to form a people who are better able to sort the wheat from the chaff when faced with the next new thing that promises progress toward the Kingdom of God.

## POST-THEISM AND THE “PROBLEM” OF GOD

by Peter Wyatt

Among the earliest expressions of post-theism is Isabel Carter Heyward’s *Redemption of God*. In it she targets the concept of God as an apathetic, lonely monarch, in defence of whose honour we construct theodicies. Although, strictly speaking, she does not abandon the concept of God, she thoroughly redefines it, for “there is no impassive, wholly other deity in charge of this world.”<sup>1</sup> In place of this “idol” she presents a thoroughly immanent God, who is “‘no one’ but rather transpersonal spirit.”<sup>2</sup> This spirit unites humans because it is “our immediate power in relation” and also “our immediate resource of power.”<sup>3</sup> If transcendence is retained in the theology of *Redemption*, it is found in the notion that the divine presence cannot be contained by a single individual and yet is a spirit in which all individuals can participate: “No one is God. No one is without the possibility of active relation to God. Everyone can incarnate God.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1990, when I first encountered *Redemption*, I understood that Carter Heyward had mounted an assault on theism,<sup>5</sup> but did not yet know that a movement called “post-theism” was emerging. Today we might define post-theism as the religious stance of those who once lived with faith in a transcendent deity but no longer do so. As such, post-theism may be distinguished from mere a-theism. To be a post-theist rather than an a-theist is to affirm that there is significant continuity between the faith once held and the new stance. As in the case of paradigm change generally, those living into a new paradigm also continue to live out of aspects of the old. So the shift from theism to post-theism is experienced as evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

This evolutionary nature of post-theism means that exercising ministry and gathering liturgically are still valued by many non-theists. Thus, in her recent work, *With or Without God*, Gretta Vosper offers a toolbox of resources for those conducting non-theistic “worship.” She even provides liturgies for non-theistic affirmations of faith, baptism and

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1982), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Carter Heyward continues to take this position, saying, “I am not much of a theist.” *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 5.

communion.<sup>6</sup> For many post-theists, the “Christian” community will continue to assemble to celebrate and mark milestones in the spiritual life, but without the God, now disowned, who first called it into being. You still can have it all, except for the point of it all, encounter with the Maker of heaven and earth.

Post-theists believe that they are naming the spiritual reality that many people experience—God’s troubling absence. Vosper, for example, observes:

Long ago, when we were afraid and unsure, we came to know God . . . But . . . over the past several centuries, the concept of God has been whittled down by questions we have not been able to settle. Those questions touch such subjects as human suffering and the presence of evil in the world, God’s apparent absence from our lives, God’s ongoing silence, and the apparent goodness of many who do not believe . . .<sup>7</sup>

It is not without reason that post-theists take the stand they do. They point to significant intellectual and affective challenges that contemporary Christians face. Yet we should not forget that, back in the sixties, the theologians promoting the Death of God movement took similar stances in the context of the secular city. The realm of the sacred seemed to be shrinking toward the vanishing point and God’s domain was being reduced to the gaps in our knowledge not yet filled in by science. Indeed, the “problem” of God has been around for a very long time. In the Middle Ages, for example, Thomas Aquinas referenced the existence of evil and the claim that the world can be explained on purely natural grounds as the two chief obstacles to belief in God.<sup>8</sup>

The “problem” appears with startling candour in the pages of the Bible. Job bows his head to the will of the Eternal, but refuses to call God just. The psalmist bitterly queries, “Why do the wicked prosper?” Jesus cries out in godforsakenness on the cross. The problem is set forth even in pagan literature. The ancient philosopher Epicurus argues that it belongs to the nature of God, as both all-good and all-powerful, to want to remove

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<sup>6</sup> Greta Vosper, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important than What We Believe* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008), 318-357.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia.ii.3.

evils from existence and to be able to do it. Why, then, does God not remove them?<sup>9</sup>

### **Post-theism is not the Only Answer to the Problem of Theism**

The argument of Epicurus, of course, was intended to undermine theistic belief. However, in the many centuries both before and since, people of faith have struggled with the problem of evil and undeserved suffering without abandoning faith. Given the world as it exists, they have preferred to face its terrors and joys *with* God rather than *without* God. This preference is more than grasping for a straw; it is an attestation of the qualitative difference between “the God of the philosophers” and “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Pascal). The God whom people of faith choose to serve is the self-giving God of the crucified and risen Christ. Douglas Hall has observed that what the tradition of Jerusalem offers in response to the dilemma of evil and suffering is not so much an answer as an Answerer.<sup>10</sup> A trinitarian theology of Incarnation asserts that the earthly vulnerability of Jesus was also the vulnerability of God. Paradox above paradox, the cry of dereliction from the cross means that God has entered the abyss of divine abandonment felt by humans.

In naming trinitarian theology, it is important to recognize that more traditional voices already had offered critiques of the classic concept of an impassible and absolute monarch before Carter Heyward, Dorothee Sölle and others launched theirs. They did so christologically, understanding Jesus as the incarnate Son of the Father, and with specific reference to the cross.<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Moltmann in particular opposed to the “unmoved Mover” of classical monotheism a trinitarian understanding. In *The Crucified God* he spoke of the crucifixion of Jesus as an event in the suffering of God and in such a way that makes sense of the relationship between the One who utters the cry of dereliction and the One who hears it:

To understand what happened between Jesus and his God and

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<sup>9</sup> The argument of Epicurus is extant only in its critique by Lactantius, *Treatise on the Anger of God*.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: an Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 94.

<sup>11</sup> Among Roman Catholics, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar were speaking of the “death of God” in the context of the crucifixion of Jesus, and Protestants Paul Althaus and Karl Barth employed variations of Luther’s theology of the cross to speak of the cross as an event in the being of God.

Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.<sup>12</sup>

Trinitarian differentiation enables us to understand the suffering of God in a way that avoids a simplistic assertion of “God’s death.”

Jesus’ death cannot be understood as ‘the death of God,’ but only as death *in* God. The “death of God” cannot be designated the origin of Christian theology, even if the phrase has an element of truth in it; the origin of Christian theology is only the death on the cross in God and God in Jesus’ death.<sup>13</sup>

Moltmann carried his trinitarian approach to understanding the suffering of God further in his *God in Creation*. Here he focused on the role of the Holy Spirit as “the efficacious power of the Creator and the power that quickens created things . . . Through the presence of his own being, God also participates in the destiny of his own creation. Through the spirit he suffers with the suffering of his creatures. In his spirit he experiences their annihilations. In his spirit he sighs with the enslaved creation for redemption and liberty.”<sup>14</sup> Moltmann was followed by others, including Elizabeth Johnson (*She Who Is*) and Leonardo Boff (*Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*), in speaking of the suffering of God in clearly differentiated trinitarian terms. It is precisely their use of trinitarian theology that allows these authors to avoid the unfortunate legacy of divine *apatheia* in classical theism. None of them, of course, has adopted a post-theistic stance.

### The Nature of Divine Power

Among Christian intellectual responses to the dilemma posed by Epicurus is renewed understanding of the meaning of divine power. Is it to be identified with literal omnipotence? Logically speaking, most of us would

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1974), 243.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 96-7.

agree that God cannot do the logically impossible, since the very thought provokes incomprehension in us and would undermine the intelligibility of the created order. Theologically speaking, the portrayal of divine power in Scripture is not that of a literal and arbitrary omnipotence.

The Bible portrays the exercise of divine power more in terms of its quality than its magnitude. God comes to all humans, and to the people of Israel in particular, not with an overriding imposition of the divine will, but the establishment of covenants, impassioned pleas for faithfulness, summons to observe ethical commands, and expressions of anger, grief and delight. These are evidences of a relationship more like that of a parent to a teenage child than of an absolute monarch to a subject people. To cite a single example, consider these verses from Hosea 11:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them, the more they went from me . . .

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them . . .

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

It is not to be doubted that God has power beyond creaturely comprehension. Yet this power is largely exercised within the bounds of covenantal relationships and rarely coercively. The characteristic expression of divine power in the Bible is *persuasive*.

This biblical insight is taken up in a programmatic way by Process theologians who maintain that God's power is essentially persuasive with regard not only to humans but also to all creation. They hypothesize that even in its minute constituent parts—electrons, atoms and molecules—all creation is capable of response to the allure of a divine Love. Lifting up a frequently overlooked biblical thread on the nature of creation, they assert that God is still engaged in the creative process, striving to subdue chaos, wrestling with Leviathan. On this view, undeserved suffering and evil exist because the universe is still a work in progress.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, as Aristotle surmised, and some Process thinkers have stated, the universe itself is co-eternal with God, so that the divine creative work must

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., David Griffin, "Creation out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

contend with a universe of powers that always has existed and will exist.

Whether the universe is temporal or eternal in nature, the Process perspective is that God has unsurpassable but nonetheless limited power. God may will to bring about only good for all creatures, but cannot do so without the collaboration of the creatures themselves. Accordingly, one ought not to imagine that God sends tidal waves or prostate cancer or tyrants or poverty to punish the disobedient or to test human resolve. Rather, God sides with vulnerable creatures, working to oppose destructive forces, to comfort victims, and to build just and sustainable earth communities. On such a view, it is possible to continue to assert that God is all-loving because not all-powerful. Crudely put, God cannot be blamed for what is beyond divine power to rectify unilaterally.

But this resolution of the dilemma generates its own problems. First, if God is not to be blamed for the bad things that happen, why is God to be praised for the good things that happen? Carter Heyward insists: “Just as evil is the result of humanity’s wrong choices, so too good is the result of humanity’s right choices.”<sup>16</sup> Second, Process thought tends to leave the conclusion of the story in doubt. If it is the case that God struggles still to subdue Leviathan and reduce unruly chaos to order, does this mean that the outcome of human history and of the history of the universe is uncertain? The possibility that God might lose the battle seems fundamentally contrary to the eschatological witness of the Bible and to the human hope engendered by it.

These two problems push us to confront the question of how we are to conceive of God’s interaction with the world such that praise and prayer still make sense, and that God’s sovereignty over creation and human history can be affirmed.

### **Panentheism**

One of the ancillary concepts widely adopted by a cross-section of theologians, including Process thinkers and radical trinitarians like Moltmann, is panentheism. While *pantheism* identifies God with all things, panentheism asserts that “all things are in God and God in all things.” Anna Case-Winters illustrates the God-world relationship on a panentheistic basis by speaking of God carrying the world the way a

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<sup>16</sup> Heyward, *Redemption*, 159.

mother carries her child in the womb. Drawing on the concepts of seminal Process philosopher Charles Hartshorne, including his definition of power as “the capacity to influence and be influenced,” she observes:

A mother does not *control* the child in the womb—as any mother can testify. Mutual influence characterizes the relation. The two are in a sense inter-dependent and the well-being of the one depends upon the well-being of the other. Nevertheless, the relation is an asymmetrical relation. The mother has greater influence of the child than *vice versa*. In this relation the mother’s power is “uniquely excellent” and “qualitatively superior.” The influence of the mother on the child is “all-inclusive” and “unsurpassable,” while the child in the womb is only one aspect of the life of the mother.<sup>17</sup>

### **God’s Self-Limitation and All-Sufficiency**

Those who disagree with Aristotle and the more extreme Process thinkers believe that the physical universe came into being *ex nihilo*. They still may agree that, once God has brought creatures into existence, including humans possessing free will, divine power cannot be understood to be the exercise of unlimited power without regard to the divine purpose in creation. The implication of the divine decision to create the universe is that God desires relationship with creatures and is willing to share power with them. While still possessing unsurpassable power, God engages these possessors of creaturely power, luring them by love to accomplish the divine purposes.

On this view, God’s power is *self*-limited, an abiding consequence of the free divine decision to create the universe and to summon forth from the unfolding creation increasingly complex and responsive creatures. God’s commitment to persuasive power is freely undertaken and not the result of external necessity (e.g., the opposing power of unordered chaos). This means that the divine sovereignty is intact and that there is an all-sufficiency in God to bring the divine venture of creation to its intended goal, drawing the creation ever onward through persuasive power.

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<sup>17</sup> Anna Case-Winters, “What Do We Mean When We Say That God Is ‘All-Powerful’?” *Encounter*, 57.3, 227f.

### **Varieties of Theism**

Critiques of theism sometimes are broad-brush, resulting in a failure to distinguish among varied theistic approaches. It would be easy, for instance, to dismiss John Calvin's theology, because of its emphasis on the divine sovereignty over all of life, as another "deplorable" example of divine power as coercive and dominating. To be sure, Calvin does assign the control and direction of all events to divine determination such that there are no fortuitous or chance events. But this divine control functions in his theology chiefly to assure believers that they are grasped by an indomitable providential care. Thus his emphasis on the providential disposition of all events is founded not on a notion of arbitrary and absolute power, but on God's unending care for the creation:

. . . To make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception . . . Faith ought to penetrate more deeply, namely, having found him Creator of all, forthwith to conclude he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver—not only in that he drives the celestial frame as well as its several parts by a universal motion, but also in that he sustains, nourishes and cares for everything that he has made, even to the least sparrow.<sup>18</sup>

"Engaged in ceaseless activity," God has an ongoing and intimate relationship with the world and all creaturely existence. Calvin's God is "hands-on" and certainly not a "God of the gaps." At its heart, Calvin's doctrine of providence focuses on the preservation of the church; it is believers who "taste God's special care, by which alone his fatherly favour is known."<sup>19</sup>

Calvin also understands that God's normal way of working is through instrumentality, the use of "secondary" or "inferior" causes. These are the natural occurrences and human actions through which the benefits of "the principal Author" unfold. So, for example, in times of difficulty, people of faith should not wait for some miraculous

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<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.xvi.1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

intervention but rather look for God's help through human means. The believer "will neither cease to take counsel, nor be sluggish in beseeching the assistance of those whom he sees have the means to help him . . . He will put them to use as lawful instruments of divine providence."<sup>20</sup> While post-theists, wielding Ockham's razor, regard the supposition of a transcendent Source as unnecessary to explain the best fruits of human community, Calvin is clear that the spirit of mutual aid and assistance to which we are called in community life is evidence of providential care.

To understand the theism of Calvin one also has to grasp how enraptured he was by the magnificence of the creation, calling it "the theatre of God's glory." Indeed, these works of creation are the originally intended revelation of the divine being and perfections. As God "irradiates the whole world by his splendour, this is the garment in which he who is hidden in himself, appears in a manner visible to us."<sup>21</sup> While we see God's very heart in the incarnate Christ, in beholding God's works believers are also privileged to see God's "hands and feet."<sup>22</sup> Serene Jones draws our attention to the aesthetic sensibility present in Calvin's appreciation of the creation, observing that, if the creation reflects God's glory, then, in beholding the creation, we are seeing the beauty of God.<sup>23</sup>

Like Celtic Christianity's vision of the controlling presence of the triune God in nature and human events, Calvin sees the ongoing life of the creation as the sphere of divine agency. He clearly was not a panentheist, and yet his portrayal of the ongoing and intimate connection between God and creatures has a resonance with "all things in God, and God in all things." Not all theism is bereft of the concept of an engaged and caring Creator.

### **The Being of God**

How might one conceive of the very being of this God who enters into relationship with the creation? Part of the critique of theism is that belief in God, at least as popularly expressed, assumes that God possesses being

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., I.xvii.9.

<sup>21</sup> Commentary on Psalm 104.1.

<sup>22</sup> "Argument," Commentary on Genesis, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Serene Jones, "Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, eds. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 24-5.

just in the way creatures do, albeit as “Supreme Being,” and is seen as a person, much like a human person. The intellectual tradition of Christianity, of course, is subtler than this. As Source of being, God’s own being is unique and beyond comprehension. Thomas Aquinas described the existence of creatures as a mixture of actuality and potentiality, while God’s is pure actuality. With reference to the “I am who I am” of Exodus 3.14, Aquinas maintained that only in the case of God is essence the same as existence. All creaturely existence depends on God, who is existence itself. As a child might say, “There is an Is.”<sup>24</sup>

As well, in the last century, Paul Tillich spoke of God as “being-itself” and “the ground of being,” and Karl Barth emphasized the otherness of God against whom “religion is man’s last defence.” Even our hymnody knows that God is “Being of beings.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly, there are ways to express belief in a transcendent and sovereign God that do not involve portraying God as one being among beings or result in domesticating the divine Mystery.

Yet, let us underscore the significance of invocation of the “Being of beings.” This Other-than-us, Being-itself, is still the divine Lover and Pursuer of creatures, to whom we may cry “Thou!” in petition, lamentation, rejoicing and praise. The gaping hole in the post-theistic paradigm is not simply the absence of a deity, but the absence of One who is capable of intimate relationship with creatures and of inter-personal communion, the Abba of Jesus Christ. While post-theists may view the thought of prayer to God an anthropomorphic throwback, surely the God who is “Holy Mystery,” beyond human comprehension and the source of human existence, cannot be *less* than capable of inter-personal relationship. To think otherwise is to deny the heart of the biblical story, i.e., its witness to the self-communication of a sovereign Love.

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<sup>24</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943), 133.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Tersteegen, “Lo, God is here,” in *The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada*, #21. Translated from the German by John Wesley.

# THE CHRISTOLOGY OF JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN—AND AN ALTERNATIVE

by Don Schweitzer

Progressive Christianity is a movement committed to intellectual rigour, honesty and truth.<sup>1</sup> As John Dominic Crossan's video talks and recent books are featured and recommended on Progressive Christian websites and in their literature, I will focus on his understanding of Jesus Christ as a way of discussing the christology of Progressive Christianity.

Crossan was born in Ireland in 1934.<sup>2</sup> He graduated from Maynooth College with a Doctor of Divinity degree in 1959 and was an ordained Roman Catholic priest from 1957 to 1969. He has worked in New Testament studies in several institutions, moving to DePaul University in Chicago in 1969, where he is Professor Emeritus in its Department of Religious Studies. He has authored or co-authored twenty-five books and received numerous awards for the scholarly excellence of his work. His studies of the historical Jesus have been influential in Progressive Christianity and around the globe.

## Crossan's Jesus

In 1991 Crossan published *The Historical Jesus*.<sup>3</sup> This major work presented his method for understanding the historical Jesus and the conclusions it led him to, which he has refined in subsequent publications. Crossan puts great emphasis on his method, which brings together insights from cross-cultural social anthropology, Greco-Roman history, and critical investigation of traditions about Jesus in the New Testament and in related literature, like the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>4</sup> He divides these traditions into three layers. The earliest record is comprised of "words and deeds, events and happenings" that can be attributed to Jesus as an historical figure.<sup>5</sup> The second represents developments in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Gretta Vosper, "What is Progressive Christianity?" accessed June 12, 2011 at [http://grettavosper.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=32&Itemid=9](http://grettavosper.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=32&Itemid=9).

<sup>2</sup> The material in this paragraph is drawn largely from the "Biographical Summary" page of John Dominic Crossan's website, accessed June 12, 2011 at <http://www.johndominiccrossan.com/Biographical%20Summary.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii-xxxiv.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi.

former are interpreted in relation to new situations. The third represents the creation of events and sayings, and the arranging of these and other material from the first two layers into larger complexes, and eventually into the gospels found in the New Testament and elsewhere. By thus stratifying traditions about Jesus and their elements, Crossan re-constructs an image of the historical Jesus which he interprets in light of cross-cultural anthropology and Mediterranean history.

Crossan argues that Jesus began a movement characterized by a “shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus and his followers travelled throughout rural Galilee, performing healings and exorcisms, in return receiving table fellowship and practising an open commensality, eating with whomever would receive them and receiving all who would eat with them.<sup>7</sup> The kingdom of God coming into being through these actions was characterized by radical equality, mutual acceptance and the sharing of food. This vision and practice of the reign of God addressed the scarcity of food and material resources that the Jewish peasantry suffered under Roman domination, implying critique of the social hierarchies, stigmas and dominations of the Roman empire and Temple authorities. Jesus and his followers also continually moved from community to community so that they did not build up local power-bases themselves.<sup>8</sup> Crossan surmises that, while visiting Jerusalem during Passover, Jesus “exploded in indignation at the Temple as the seat and symbol of all that was non-egalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and the political level,” and symbolically acted out its destruction.<sup>9</sup> This led to his crucifixion by the Roman authority.

Was Jesus subsequently raised to new life? According to Crossan, yes and no. Yes, in that death did not triumph over Jesus and his cause; no, in that Crossan is confident that Jesus’ crucified body was probably either eaten by scavenging dogs or buried in a shallow grave and there it stayed. How does Crossan understand Jesus’ resurrection? According to Crossan, God works through human efforts.<sup>10</sup> For him, this is the locus of Jesus’ resurrection. In his view, Jesus’ program aimed at collaboration

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 261-264.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 116-118, 155.

with God's great non-violent clean-up of injustice.<sup>11</sup> This continues wherever people live by Jesus' vision.

What happened historically is that those who believed in Jesus before his execution continued to do so afterwards. Easter is not about the start of a new faith, but about the continuation of an old one. That is the only miracle and the only mystery, and it is more than enough of both.<sup>12</sup>

Somewhat in the manner of Rudolph Bultmann<sup>13</sup> and Willi Marxsen,<sup>14</sup> Crossan argues that Jesus is risen in the faith of those who continue his cause.

For Crossan, Jesus' movement lived on because Jesus' followers experienced his presence and the "Kingdom" as empowering them to continue as before.<sup>15</sup> More recently Crossan has argued that it doesn't matter much whether one interprets Jesus' resurrection literally or metaphorically (as he does). What matters is that, either way, one must take it "programmatically,"<sup>16</sup> and continue what Jesus began.

### **An Assessment**

Crossan intended his work to initiate "a Third Quest for the historical Jesus" that would replace the second associated with figures like Ernst Käsemann and Gunther Bornkamm.<sup>17</sup> In this he has been partly successful. The second quest sought to understand Jesus against the background of Second Temple Judaism. Crossan's work helped instigate a shift to interpreting Jesus in relation to Roman imperialism. The relevance

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<sup>11</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 104.

<sup>12</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 190. Crossan believes that some early Christians like Paul did see "apparitions," *ibid.*, 160, 165-170, and that scribal exegetes who believed in Jesus searched the Jewish Scriptures "to understand what had happened," *ibid.*, 163. According to Crossan it was the latter who began creating what became the resurrection narratives and prophecies in the gospels.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970), 141.

<sup>15</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 209-210.

<sup>16</sup> N.T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation? A Dialogue," in *The Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Robert Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 28.

<sup>17</sup> John Dominic Crossan, "Responses and Reflections," in *Jesus and Faith*, eds. Jeffrey Carlson and Robert Ludwig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 151.

of including this is obvious, as Jesus died, accused of sedition, on a Roman cross. Crossan's work has many insights; for instance, that religious festivals like Passover were a form of "ancient mass medium."<sup>18</sup> However, his method hasn't proved to be as reliable as he hoped<sup>19</sup> and his re-construction of the historical Jesus has three major weaknesses.

First, the second quest for the historical Jesus typically understood Jesus as an eschatological prophet who proclaimed the coming of God's reign as an imminent intervention by God in history. Many contemporary scholars of the historical Jesus continue to argue that this is probably who Jesus was.<sup>20</sup> Crossan disputes this, arguing that, after the death of John the Baptist, Jesus no longer expected a dramatic intervention by God in the future,<sup>21</sup> but instead saw God acting only through human actions, specifically through his own enacting of God's reign. Crossan's re-construction of a non-eschatological Jesus is characterized by an ethical reductionism: "the religious dimension of Jesus' word and deed is almost totally absorbed into his social role as a countercultural itinerant on the border of revolt."<sup>22</sup> For Crossan, the focus and content of Jesus' ministry was ethical. This reduction clashes with the pervasive presence of "Jewish eschatological themes in the gospels,"<sup>23</sup> which focus on God as a source of hope not limited to what people can do.

Second, Crossan's re-construction "depends on accepting the view that Galilean Jews lived in the midst of a basically Hellenistic culture."<sup>24</sup> Archaeological research does not support this. It indicates instead that at "the time of Jesus, the culture of Jewish Palestine was thoroughly and traditionally Jewish."<sup>25</sup> Hellenism influenced Second Temple Judaism, but not to the extent that Crossan assumes. The Jewish cultural context of Jesus' ministry, his baptism by John, "the known events of his life, and

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<sup>18</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Crossan's method is discussed in Dale Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 10-77.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 249-250.

<sup>21</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 47-48.

<sup>22</sup> Leander Keck, "The second coming of the liberal Jesus?" *The Christian Century*, 24-31 Aug. 1994, 785.

<sup>23</sup> E. P. Sanders, "Who Was Jesus?" *New York Review of Books*, 10 April 2003, 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

the apocalyptic movement initiated by his followers after his death suggest that Jesus understood himself and his mission in apocalyptic terms.”<sup>26</sup> The historical Jesus appears to have been an eschatological prophet.

A third major weakness of Crossan’s re-construction lies in his view that Jesus’ resurrection occurred through the movement Jesus led, continuing and spreading after his death.<sup>27</sup> Crossan’s view is problematic because this movement did not simply continue after Jesus’ death. For many it was radically transformed. Jesus the messenger became the centre of the early church’s message as the crucified and risen Christ. The notion of resurrection went from being a peripheral doctrine in Second Temple Judaism to being at the heart of Christian faith, and was transformed in the process.<sup>28</sup> What triggered these changes? Jesus’ resurrection cannot be proven by historical research or other means. But the rise of faith in his resurrection does raise the question of its cause.

[The Easter faith] could not have been self-generated, nor could it have arisen directly from Jesus’ proclamation of the advent of the kingdom. If the only sequel to that proclamation was the crucifixion, then that proclamation would have been demonstrably false. Jesus had proclaimed the coming of the kingdom and it had not come. Instead, his message had ostensibly been utterly discredited by the crucifixion.

The very fact of the church’s kerygma therefore requires that the historian postulate some other event over and above Good Friday, an event which is not itself the “rise of the Easter faith” but the cause of the Easter faith.<sup>29</sup>

For Crossan, the continuing belief of people in Jesus was itself his resurrection.<sup>30</sup> But the New Testament witnesses speak not of their own faith, but of God’s action to which their faith was a response. Crossan’s

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<sup>26</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 171.

<sup>27</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 161.

<sup>28</sup> N. T. Wright, “Opening Statement,” in “The Resurrection: Historical Event or Theological Explanation? A Dialogue,” 18-20.

<sup>29</sup> Reginald Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 169.

<sup>30</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 190-191.

failure to attend to the interruptive nature of Jesus' resurrection is a major weakness in his account of it.

### **An Alternative**

What might an understanding of the historical Jesus as an eschatological prophet look like, and what might the interruptive nature of Jesus' resurrection mean for christology?

As Crossan argues, deep social tensions in Galilee in Jesus' time helped create openings for eschatological renewal movements led by charismatic figures like John the Baptist and Jesus. Jesus' baptism by John indicates that Jesus shared John's view that God was about to intervene decisively in history. Jesus did depart from John, but not by discarding John's eschatological outlook. While John stayed by the Jordan River, Jesus went throughout Galilee to the people. John proclaimed God's coming judgment as something to be feared. Jesus proclaimed God's reign as a gift to be joyfully received. Jesus ate with those considered blatant sinners as a sign of God's acceptance of them. He was perceived to heal the sick<sup>31</sup> and perform exorcisms. Among the disciples who traveled with him was a group of twelve who symbolized the beginning of Israel's restoration. Jesus interpreted all these as signs of the in-breaking of God's reign. His stress on its imminence and importance seems to have been intended to convert those who heard him into "eschatological actors . . . conscious participants in the end-time drama" he was enacting.<sup>32</sup>

Jesus' ministry had a radical ethical orientation. Proclaiming God's coming reign meant that Roman rule would soon end.<sup>33</sup> Jesus saw God's reign as having an egalitarian ethos. His message was addressed to all, but his public ministry was characterized by a constant turning towards the marginalized and oppressed.<sup>34</sup> This was not charity but a creative

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<sup>31</sup> According to Crossan, illness is the social stigma of disease. Jesus healed illnesses "by refusing to accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracization," but he could not cure diseases. *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 151.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 103.

<sup>34</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 179; John Meier, *A Marginal Jew; Vol. III: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 528. Thus Jesus exercised what liberation theology terms "a preferential option for the poor."

solidarity expressing God's justice, that, for Jesus, was not simply distributive, but also creative, moving people from where they were to where they were called to be in relation to God and one another. At the heart of Jesus' ministry was the message that a people's hope lies ultimately not in themselves, but in God's gracious initiative.<sup>35</sup> The reign of God was a feast to which all were invited.

Jesus' death refuted his message and shattered the movement around him. Shortly thereafter, some of his followers and others experienced him as risen to new life. A coherent account of his resurrection appearances cannot be re-constructed from those in the gospels. Each account has been shaped to express the theology of the gospel in which it appears. The list of appearances Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 15: 5-8 indicates that these may have continued for several years.<sup>36</sup> Jesus' resurrection, as scandalous then as now, seems at first to have been a source of shock, bewilderment and joy to his followers. It changed the way many of Jesus' followers understood him and created a new mission for them: to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, as the Christ.

Jesus' resurrection was interpreted early on as his vindication by God and linked to his exaltation (Acts 2:22-36). Within several years of his death and rising, many Christians worshipped Jesus along with his Abba.<sup>37</sup> As the early churches tried to conceptualize who Jesus was and describe his saving significance, numerous christologies developed. Some (Philippians 2:5-11; John 1:1-5) complicated the concept of God that early Christianity inherited. People experienced salvation not simply by following Jesus, but also through faith in him as the Christ. Then as now, for many it was the latter that enabled them to persevere in the former. As the church became an established Gentile religion, attempting to understand Jesus as the source of salvation gave rise to the Arian crisis, resulting in a formulation at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE that would lead to the full development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1998), 79-80.

<sup>36</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: Part I* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1971), 301.

<sup>37</sup> Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 122-123.

### **Trinitarian Christology and Progressive Christianity**

Gretta Vosper describes Progressive Christianity as a dynamic movement continually progressing to new beliefs through critical inquiry, and in light of new knowledge and experiences.<sup>38</sup> Trinitarian faith in Jesus Christ shares this kind of dynamism, but is moved by a different principle. At the heart of the theological developments that produced the doctrine of the Trinity and later the Chalcedonian Definition is the soteriological principle, “that which is not assumed is not healed.” Because culture helps constitute peoples’ identities, this principle requires that the church’s understanding of Jesus Christ continually be re-thought in new cultural contexts, and in relation to new forms of thought and experience. But it also means that the gospel must be inculturated in ways that preserve God’s transcendence. In the Reformed theological tradition, this imperative is expressed in the understanding that the church is reformed and always in need of reform. Like Progressive Christianity, the church at its best celebrates humanity’s gifts as created in God’s image. But even the best human gifts may be distorted by sin. For this reason, the United Church historically has exalted God’s grace as its principle of transcendence. It proclaims Jesus Christ as “our judge and our hope,”<sup>39</sup> not its own excellence.

Jesus’ radical ethic leads to the recognition that all people need grace<sup>40</sup> and requires strong moral sources to empower one to follow it. Jesus’ resurrection makes his ministry, person, and even his cross this kind of moral resource. The decisions of Nicaea and Chalcedon expand this moral empowerment by affirming that in Jesus God shared human sufferings, brought hope for the final overcoming of evil,<sup>41</sup> and revealed the true divine nature and the meaning of becoming fully human.

The doctrine of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian Definition are not necessarily relics from the past. They can be appropriated as expressing principles of dynamic transcendence. For instance, the Chalcedonian affirmation that in Jesus the Word assumed human nature as such can

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<sup>38</sup> Vosper, “What is Progressive Christianity?”

<sup>39</sup> “A New Creed,” The United Church of Canada. <http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed>, July 1, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>41</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Christology, Ethics, and Spirituality,” in *Thinking of Christ*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003), 199-201.

break the “grip of androcentric Christology”<sup>42</sup> which mistakenly makes Jesus’ male gender normative. There is future in the past,<sup>43</sup> in particular, in the church’s memory of Jesus Christ. Uncritically abandoning this living memory can stifle the Spirit by discarding moral sources needed to empower people to follow Jesus.

The great world religions, Christianity included, are auto-regenerating movements, capable of responding to new challenges, and of developing critiques of their own sin.<sup>44</sup> Christianity does so by creatively re-interpreting its symbol systems and traditional affirmations, re-tracing the decisions that led to their formulation and re-thinking these in light of the witness of the Word and the Holy Spirit in the present. Critically drawing upon Christian symbols enables Christians to generate a critique of their beliefs without falling into the trap of worshipping themselves.

### **The “Immanent Frame”**

Why does Crossan’s re-construction of the historical Jesus appeal to Progressive Christians? The answer may lie in the relationship between Gretta Vosper’s description of the progressive nature of Progressive Christianity<sup>45</sup> and several features that Charles Taylor has identified in the intellectual ethos of developed North Atlantic countries that directly affect the credibility and intelligibility of religious belief. One feature is the sense that humanity inhabits “an immanent, impersonal order,”<sup>46</sup> which Taylor describes as the “immanent frame.”<sup>47</sup> This immanent frame is understood by many to be a worldview that has been arrived at through a progressive increase of knowledge that surpasses that of previous eras. It represents a coming of age on the part of humanity. For those who believe this, affirming an “orthodox” understanding of Jesus clashes with their sense of humanity’s rationality and dignity.

A second feature of the present is that while religious faith is experienced by many as crucial to a fully human life, it is also seen to

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<sup>42</sup> Cahill, “Christology, Ethics, and Spirituality,” 203.

<sup>43</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 48-51.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 257.

<sup>45</sup> Vosper, “What is Progressive Christianity?”

<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 288.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 542-543.

endanger this through demanding the sacrifice of valued aspects of our humanity. A key dilemma of the present is how to understand our religious visions in ways that move us to self-transcendence without denying or violating essential aspects of our humanity.<sup>48</sup>

This analysis suggests possible reasons why Progressive Christians prefer Crossan's interpretation of Jesus and others like it to those more plausible in terms of the biblical witness and archaeological findings. Progressive Christianity's notion of intellectual maturity means that aspects of the biblical witness that clash with the immanent frame must be repudiated. The christology of John Dominic Crossan enables them to affirm Jesus in a way that fits neatly within the immanent frame.<sup>49</sup> But the cost is high. This is a christology that does not address guilt and cannot bring hope in relation to the cosmic powers of sin and death.

But Taylor notes that, at present, "many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other,"<sup>50</sup> so that none is untroubled or secure. The immanent frame fragilizes trinitarian christology in certain respects. Discrepancies between Progressive Christianity's claims and the biblical witness, developments in Western philosophy and Middle Eastern archaeology, and the way many experience trinitarian Christian faith as encouraging their moral and spiritual maturity, fragilize Progressive Christianity's claims in return. Both will likely be part of the foreseeable future. The two could become conversation partners spurring each other on to critical thinking. Taylor argues that an attachment to either will come from "a sense of its inner spiritual power, chastened by the challenges"<sup>51</sup> each poses to the other. Trinitarian Christianity's greater ability to interpret the biblical witness and its potentially greater spiritual depth inclines me towards it.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 639-640.

<sup>49</sup> Ted Peters, "The Future of the Resurrection," in Stewart, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 152-153.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 531; 595.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 680.

# THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS ACCORDING TO “PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY”

by Harold Wells

I suppose we all want to be “progressive” if progress in theology means a deeper understanding of God's truth and more faithful practice of Christian discipleship. But some of us are reluctant to label ourselves *progressive*. It seems to imply disdain for those who disagree, as though they are *regressive*. However, those of us who identify ourselves as catholic and Reformed, Christ-centered and trinitarian, may have much in common with those who call themselves “progressive.” We generally concur with their sharp opposition to simplistic biblical literalism, and know that the Bible includes symbol, metaphor and legend. We feel no need to credit every miracle story as factual, and recognize discrepancies and elements of legend even in the various gospel accounts of the resurrection. Some Progressives are our good friends and dedicated church members, and we ourselves are not immune to doubt or questioning in this confused, post-modern time.

The Progressive theologians are not a well defined group, but on the question of the resurrection of Jesus, major commonalities exist among such figures as John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan, all influential authors among our church folk. A close look at their offerings on the resurrection reveals that their main operative concepts are “metaphor” and “apparition.” In this brief article, I will ask whether the resurrection understood in these terms is really more credible than affirming it as an actual, bodily event, and whether Christian faith is sustainable into the future on the basis of resurrection understood in this way. Christians throughout the centuries have seen the event of the raising of Jesus as foundational for their faith. To set aside the resurrection of Jesus would be to imply that the church has been profoundly mistaken, at its very core, throughout its history. We cannot forget Paul's declaration in the earliest testimony to the resurrection: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor 15:14).

## **Metaphor and Apparitions**

In some Progressive authors we find a totally dismissive treatment of the resurrection. Gretta Vosper, for example, United Church minister and

chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, considers “God” an expendable concept for Christianity. She writes of resurrection as “previously understood to be the spontaneous resuscitation of Jesus’ body after he was crucified and kept in a tomb for an indefinite, though usually misrepresented as three days, duration, now meaning starting over, new chances.”<sup>1</sup> The resurrection, then, has nothing to do with Jesus himself, but is simply a metaphor for people’s experience of new beginnings.

Spong, who speaks against any concept of God as a “theistic external deity,”<sup>2</sup> writes an enthusiastic foreword to Vosper’s book. Yet he himself declares that “belief in the resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith. It is the Christian faith.”<sup>3</sup> He affirms that “Something happened!—an incredible explosion of power” that transformed lives. But Spong sees the resurrection stories as mythical, or metaphor in narrative form. Like Bultmann in mid-twentieth century, he believes that that Something needs to be “demythologized.” It should be understood as an ecstatic moment, a “non-objective” religious experience.<sup>4</sup>

Marcus Borg writes disparagingly of *doctrines* and *beliefs*. Yet he affirms a doctrine of a compassionate God in terms of *panentheism* (God in all things). This God, who is not “personlike,” but a “presence,” does not intervene in the world, and certainly cannot raise the dead bodily.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Borg agrees that “Easter is utterly central to Christianity.” He asserts that the affirmation “God raised Jesus from the dead” is the “foundational affirmation of the New Testament . . . [T]he best explanation for the rise of Christianity—indeed the only adequate explanation—is the resurrection of Jesus.” But the resurrection is a metaphor that has two meanings: Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord. Borg thinks the empty tomb is irrelevant and that the “appearances” of the risen Jesus should be seen as *apparitions* or paranormal visions.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean “just that his memory lived on, or his spirit lived on, as we

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<sup>1</sup> Gretta Vosper, *Without or Without God* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008), 117.

<sup>2</sup> John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 73-74.

<sup>3</sup> Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 2 & 3.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), chs. 5, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 129-132.

sometimes speak of Lincoln living on.”<sup>7</sup> While the sense in which Jesus lives on is rather unclear, for Borg these experiences seem to be real encounters with a living Jesus, which continue to this day.

Crossan too prefers to speak of metaphor and apparitions. He holds that resurrections were everyday news in the ancient world: “Visions of risen corpses or apparitions of resurrected bodies are not uniquely special.”<sup>8</sup> A perusal of Crossan's works discloses a certain inconsistency on the question. Sometimes he reduces the resurrection to a kind of parable, like that of the Good Samaritan.<sup>9</sup> He thinks that “the apparitions are not historical events in the sense of trances or ecstasies, except in the case of Paul.”<sup>10</sup> He practises a hermeneutic of suspicion, arguing that the resurrection narratives were told to legitimize certain power seekers in the early church, claiming apparitions for the sake of hierarchical status.<sup>11</sup> Yet sometimes he speaks as though Jesus has some actual continuing existence: “That *is* the resurrection, the continuing presence in a continuing community of the past Jesus in a radically new and transcendental mode of present and future existence.”<sup>12</sup> He can even speak positively of the resurrection as “*embodied*,”<sup>13</sup> but by this he seems to mean Jesus' embodiment in the church. More recently, Crossan ascribes apparitions not only to Paul but to other disciples as well: “I am convinced as a fact that they had apparitions. How you explain that is a separate issue, but it happened; they are not making it up; it's not hallucinations . . .”<sup>14</sup> While he rejects bodily resurrection, he too seems to be saying that the disciples enjoyed, in some sense, an encounter with a living Jesus.

Evidently, the Progressives' main concern is ethical and political. To affirm the resurrection of Jesus is to affirm that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. As Crossan says, whether we take it literally or metaphorically, we

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<sup>7</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 54.

<sup>8</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), xxx-xxxi.

<sup>9</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 216.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>11</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), ch. 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>13</sup> *The Birth of Christianity*, xxxi.

<sup>14</sup> *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 33.

must take it “programmatically.” The important thing is to work for justice and peace, and “how we are going to take back God's world from the thugs.”<sup>15</sup>

Metaphor, then, is the preferred term used by both Borg and Crossan to refer to the resurrection, explaining that a metaphor is a non-literal manner of speaking (while Spong speaks similarly of myth symbol, or midrash).<sup>16</sup> Most of us recognize metaphorical or symbolic meaning in the Bible, e.g., the stories of creation and fall, of the tower of Babel, perhaps of the virginal conception of Jesus or of some of his miracles. Some of these point beyond themselves to a general truth about the human condition, or convey important christological meaning. Even the resurrection narratives, which disagree as to detail, surely include non-literal elements. Disagreement arises about what is literal and what is metaphorical. For many of us the raising of Jesus himself is the watershed event, the root which generated legends and metaphors that would never have developed in the faith community except for the founding event itself.

Spong, Borg and Crossan, however, do not use the term as reductively as Vosper does. The resurrection is not merely a renewed experience of the self, but in some sense an experience of Jesus alive after his death. This can best be understood as a fairly common religious experience, not unique to the apostles, continuing down through the centuries to the present day, as one of transformation and empowerment.

Crossan's view of the resurrection needs to be seen in the context of his massive work on the historical Jesus. He places Jesus within the context of first century Palestinian Judaism, characterizing him as a “peasant Jewish Cynic,” likening him to that Greco-Roman movement that practised a radical egalitarianism.<sup>17</sup> He points to Jesus' practice of eating with the outcast and general disregard for hierarchy and social status.<sup>18</sup> Jesus was an admirable social activist who was executed by the Romans for political reasons. Over against the cruel exploitation of the ruling powers, Jesus taught and embodied the Kingdom of God, a reign of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 28-29; also Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Resurrection*, ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *The Historical Jesus*, 421-422.

<sup>18</sup> *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 102-122.

peace and justice, healing and love. Crossan's analysis of Jesus' historical context, and his vision of the political Jesus, are valuable, and have much in common with black and liberation christologies.

Crossan argues that the reports of the empty tomb are not evidence of a bodily resurrection, since, he believes, Jesus was never buried in a tomb. Victims of crucifixion were left by the Romans to be devoured by “the dogs beneath the cross,” or thrown into a shallow grave. The early Christians, who loved Jesus dearly, created the story that a member of the council, Joseph of Arimathea, used his influence to have Jesus' body buried in a tomb. Crossan is sympathetic to the lie by which “the horror of that brutal truth is sublimated through hope and imagination into its opposite.”<sup>19</sup> If one assumes, as Crossan does, that no such thing as a bodily resurrection can ever occur, some other explanation of the empty tomb is necessary. He thinks that Mark created the story of the empty tomb,<sup>20</sup> and that the story of Joseph was invented as the only credible explanation of how a crucified person could have received proper burial. Yet his theory remains a highly speculative hypothesis, based on questionable historical reconstructions and inferences.

### **The Alternative Vision of N. T. Wright**

Critical questions are raised, of course, over against these progressive perspectives on the resurrection. A major opponent is N. T. Wright, whose vast knowledge of ancient religious and philosophical texts outshines (in my view) even that of Crossan. In an 800 page volume, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Wright challenges common progressivist arguments against the uniqueness of Jesus' resurrection, such as the frequent claim that it is analogous to other “resurrections” in the ancient world,<sup>21</sup> e.g., the dying and rising gods of many mythologies, the *apotheosis* of emperors to divine status, the visitations of ghosts, etc. Reviewing all of these at length, Wright points out that the term “resurrection” was not a general term for life after death. *Anastasis* (literally, “standing up again”) means that “the person who died is now, after a period of being dead, alive again within the present world.”<sup>22</sup> Resurrection expectation in Daniel and 2

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>20</sup> Crossan, in Stewart, *op. cit.*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> *The Birth of Christianity*, xviii.

<sup>22</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 62.

Maccabees, and in Second Temple Judaism generally, was for a universal resurrection, not that of an individual, and always meant bodily resurrection.

Wright contends that “nowhere within Judaism, let alone paganism, is a sustained claim advanced that resurrection has actually happened to a particular individual.” The ancients knew as well as we do that dead people stay dead. “Lots of things could happen to the dead in the beliefs of pagan antiquity but resurrection was not among the available options.”<sup>23</sup> He rejects the usual assertion of Progressives that Paul did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, since he does not mention the empty tomb. But Wright argues that, as a Pharisee of his time, Paul could have meant nothing else when he wrote in Phil 3:21 that “[God] will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory . . .” and in 1 Cor 15 likened the *soma pneumatikon* of believers to the risen body of Jesus. The Progressives often speak pejoratively of “resuscitation” of Jesus’ body as a naïve misunderstanding. But Wright, pointing to the unprecedented, bizarre reports of the risen Jesus, knows that Jesus was not merely “resuscitated” to return to mortal existence. In Wright’s terms, the risen Jesus existed in a “transphysical body.”<sup>24</sup>

Wright asserts that the proclamation of an historical individual, Jesus, as risen Lord and Messiah, is a startling, innovative “mutation” within Judaism that requires explanation. He contends that by far the best explanation of this mutation of resurrection belief is that two things happened: first, Jesus’ tomb was found empty; and second, “several people . . . claimed to have seen him alive in a way for which the readily available language of ghosts, spirits and the like was inappropriate, and for which their previous beliefs about life after death, and resurrection in particular, had not prepared them.”<sup>25</sup> Without empty tomb and appearances, the faith of the early Christians in Jesus is inexplicable. Had Jesus not appeared to the disciples, the empty tomb itself would have been insufficient grounds for the message of resurrection. The body may have been stolen. Yet, had the body been found in the tomb, or elsewhere,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 28, 38, 215.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 711.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10.

the appearances would have been dismissed as ghosts or as subjective visions. Visions or ghostly appearances have been well known in both ancient and modern times, and “could not possibly have given rise to the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead.” To suppose that Jesus had simply died and gone to heaven, and appeared from the other side as a ghost, could not have generated claims that he is Lord and Messiah. Wright judges that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is “probable.” This probability is “so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.”<sup>26</sup> He rejects the restrictions of “modernist” historical science that would automatically rule out as impossible all events for which there are no analogies.<sup>27</sup>

In my view, Wright has overstated the matter of “probability,” as though every rational person is forced to believe. If the resurrection is so nearly certain to historical investigation, is there any need for “faith”? Has he not missed the scandalous, offensive nature of the resurrection proclamation, both to ancient and contemporary ears? Wright knows that “faith” in the risen Jesus means making the resurrection the central plank of one's worldview, and involves the commitment of one's whole life. He concedes that historical argument alone cannot force anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead; but “historical argument is remarkably good at clearing away the undergrowth behind which skepticisms of various sorts have been hiding.”<sup>28</sup>

Wright agrees with both Borg and Crossan that in the Roman Empire the resurrection of Jesus implied the radical, seditious claim that Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord, and that the risen Jesus was the foundation upon which the early Christians resisted and undermined the empire. Jesus, after all, was given the divine titles of the Emperor of Rome: the Lord, Saviour, Son of God, who brings peace on earth. He believes that the risen Lord, as conqueror of death, continues to imply a major challenge to all imperial cults and tyrannies.<sup>29</sup> Crossan, in his dialogue with Wright, asserts that this authority of Jesus stands, whether the resurrection is taken literally or metaphorically. Wright, however, believes

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 687, 710.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 718.

<sup>29</sup> N. T. Wright, “Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire,” in *Paul and Politics*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160-183.

that Crossan's view of the resurrection as metaphorical, non-concrete and non-bodily, is an abstraction that fails to inspire the necessary courage and hope to stand up to empire.<sup>30</sup> Here Wright would seem to be more closely aligned with the black and liberationist theologies of resurrection in their struggles against racism, oppression and poverty.

### **“Progressive” Suppositions**

Many weighty scholars and theologians affirm the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and offer critique of the suppositions that underlie the theology of the Progressives. Generally, Progressives seem to operate out of a modernist notion of the physical world as a closed, causal nexus, which excludes any possibility of divine action into creation. Theologians in close dialogue with the natural sciences leave behind this deistic, mechanical (Newtonian) view of nature, and point to post-modern science, marked by relativity and quantum theory, which is more open to the mysterious dimensions and possibilities of the physical world.<sup>31</sup> Some question the assumption that, since, in our general experience, the dead stay dead, this must always be so. We must view the resurrection as an eschatological event, affording a proleptic glimpse into a new creation guided by new laws quite different from those of the present world.<sup>32</sup>

Others vigorously defend the bodily character of the risen Jesus as more in line with contemporary science and philosophical anthropology. The theologian/physicist John Polkinghorne argues that a purely spiritual resurrection of Jesus seems to imply a body/soul dualism, which finds little support today in scientific or philosophical anthropology. “It is intrinsic to human beings to be embodied,” he argues.<sup>33</sup> Nancey Murphy, similarly rejecting anthropological dualism, asserts that embodiment is essential to social life. “My body is the landmark that connects me with everything else that exists physically, specifically with all of history and

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<sup>30</sup> Crossan and Wright, in Stewart, *op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Robert John Russell, “Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, eds. Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 29-30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. See also Ted Peters, “The Future of the Resurrection,” in Stewart, *op. cit.*, 166-167.

<sup>33</sup> John Polkinghorne, “Eschatological Credibility: Emergent and Teleological Processes,” in Peters et al., *op. cit.*, 54.

society.”<sup>34</sup> These thinkers agree that bodily resurrection (though not “proved”) is in fact more credible in light of contemporary science and philosophy than “spiritual” or apparitional notions of resurrection.

Jürgen Moltmann writes in a similar vein that the resurrection of Jesus indicates “the beginning of a fundamental change in the conditions of possible experience.” Christ's appearances were not derived from the faith of the disciples, he insists; their faith derived from the appearances.<sup>35</sup> As an ecological theologian, Moltmann strongly affirms the relevance of Jesus' bodily resurrection for an authentically Christian attitude to the natural world, and to our own bodily life as part of nature. Since the body of Jesus was raised up, and the biblical eschatological hope is for a “new heaven and new earth,” we cannot be indifferent to the fate of humanity, other creatures, or our planet. God's salvation, after all, is not only for human souls, but for all things. “God does not save . . . creation for heaven; [God] renews the earth. God's kingdom is the kingdom of the resurrection on earth. That puts all those who hope for a resurrection under an obligation to remain true to the earth, to respect it, and to love it as they love themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

I conclude that the “progressive” theology of resurrection as metaphor and apparition is a pale and abstract doctrine that offers little hope of sustaining a faithful Christian community in a difficult future. There is little evidence that it will speak with power to the younger generations, whom the Progressives hope to attract into the church, or inspire the courage to stand up to new tyrannies that may confront humanity in the decades ahead. The risen Jesus is all we have. In this dark world, the raising of Jesus stands as a tiny, steady point of light. But it is enough to lead us into the future in confidence and hope.

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<sup>34</sup> Nancey Murphy, “Resurrection Body and Personal Identity,” in Peters et al., *op. cit.*, 207.

<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 46, 48.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

# FUNDAMENTALLY ECCENTRIC: REFLECTIONS ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN IN OUR TIME

by Robert C. Fennell

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century much of Western liberal Protestantism began a shift away from a more-than-millennium-long theological emphasis on *atonement* toward a newer emphasis on *incarnation*. In the first instance, this was a good thing; it meant that we came to see the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ with renewed clarity. It also helped us to see afresh the way in which human beings participate in the divine life. The downfall of this “turn” to incarnation, I would argue, was the beginning of a significant distortion in theology, a distortion toward which the current Progressive Christianity movements sometimes drift. The emphasis on incarnation can tempt us to understand human beings (with or without creation as a whole) as divine in ourselves, even as the primary locus of divinity. The “otherness” of God, as it were, becomes obscured or, worse, denied.

From about the 1920s onward, this “otherness” of God was one of the corrections that some theologians (Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer among them) wanted to offer to Western Protestantism. We are *not* God, they asserted; we are not the sum total of what is signified by the term “divine.” Human beings, therefore, are not the centre of reality; God is. We are not (in ourselves) the best source for understanding reality; God is. Thus I want to suggest that to be human means to be fundamentally “eccentric,”<sup>1</sup> since God our Source is the centre. We might compare this with the shift from the belief that the solar system is geocentric (earth-centred) to the understanding that it is heliocentric (sun-centred).

Nevertheless, the emphasis on incarnation as a sign of our “human divinity” (without or without Jesus) continued to have a powerful influence in Western Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now into the 21<sup>st</sup>. This has sometimes been called the “turn to the subject,” again placing the human self at the centre of theological inquiry and meaning. Like René Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who eliminated all sources of wisdom and knowledge except his own subjective self-apprehension, there are

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<sup>1</sup> I’m thinking of eccentric here as “off-centre,” or “derived from the centre” (*ek* = Greek *off, from, out of*). A recent book by David Kelsey (*Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009) uses a similar term but develops the idea in rather different ways.

contemporary thinkers who continue to regard human beings as fundamentally “centric”—that is, at the centre of the meaningfulness not only of human existence but of all reality.

In this essay, I would like to suggest that there are two core problems with this “centric” view, and to provide a series of alternative, “eccentric” ways of understanding what it means to be human.

## **Two Problems**

The first problem with looking to the human individual self as the fundamental source of data for understanding reality is that this approach overlooks a core element of our reality: we are principally social, not individualistic, beings. The second problem with the “centric” approach is that it is unbiblical and therefore vulnerable to the distortions of the age in which we are living.

That we are principally social beings is well-attested. Our shared animal nature propels us generation after generation to mate and procreate, delighting not only in sexual union but also in the intimacy of partnership and the spellbinding (and sleep-depriving) experience of having babies. Add to this our perennial proclivities to live in families of various kinds, to congregate in social groups of all descriptions, to live in communities, and so on. *Why do we socialize each other in this way?* We could argue this backwards to a point of infinite evolutionary regress, but perhaps the short answer is because we need each other. This is obvious to many present-day non-Western cultures, as well as the ancient cultures of the Bible, for whom the self is always a “communal self,” defined and experienced in community at all times. So it seems peculiar to suppose that a “centric” view of the individual person is a helpful or healthy way to interpret reality.

The second core problem with the “centric” approach is that it is unbiblical. Why is this a problem? It is no problem at all if we suppose the Bible to be a compendium of old myths, and odd, possibly interesting, but essentially useless (and maybe dangerous) stories and teachings.

If the Bible is important to us, we ought to give it some careful attention.<sup>2</sup> The Bible can be of help to us in resisting the distortions of the

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<sup>2</sup> The United Church of Canada has consistently claimed that the Bible is vital to our life as a church, our personal faith, and our theological work. Most recently, *A Song of Faith* (2006) spoke

age in which we live. In contrast, the “centric” approach does not finally help us to walk authentically on a Christian path. We need instead to think of ourselves as “eccentric”—accepting God (who is not the same as human beings) as the centre.

### **The Alternatives**

Let us consider several ways of understanding what it means to be human under the rubric of “fundamental eccentricity,” drawing especially on the Bible as a key resource for shaping these understandings.

*First, our human nature and identity are given to us by God the Creator, before whom we are both creatures and children.* As creatures, we are embodied, limited, and mortal (Gen 1:26-7; Job 14:5). Our materiality and mortality are undeniable. The span of our lives has lengthened in recent decades, but nearly all of us are inevitably bound to die within a century or less—scarcely a tick of the clock in geological time. We are undoubtedly creaturely, sharing a great deal in common with other “mere” creatures.

At the same time, God calls us beloved, blessed, God’s own (1 Pet 2:9). We are adopted into the family of God. Through the work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to weave our mortal lives together with an eternal existence (John 4:14). We are God’s children, called to maturity of faith and life. All these realities—as creatures and children—are communal realities, for we share them without possessing them. They give to us a particular dignity, grounded not in our own “centric” capacity for being personally amazing, but “eccentrically” in God’s gift of grace. It is God, after all, who is Creator of the creatures and Parent of the children.

*Second, being human means we are called to be members of a greater whole, the body of Christ.* Corporate capitalism, perhaps through Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” guides those living under it away from seeing ourselves as part of a greater whole. Formerly, the language of *citizenship* was important in Canadian public discourse. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a shift away from “citizen” to “voter” language, thereby shrinking the number of persons who really mattered in the public forum;

next came a shift to the language of “taxpayer.” Now it is just as common to hear human beings described first of all as “consumers.” Marx cautioned against humans becoming interchangeable units of labour. It seems now that we have become dispensable units of consumption. *To consume*, as isolated individuals, is the apex of identity and vocation in that view.

At the time of this writing (November 2011), the “Occupy Wall Street” and corresponding protests around the world are attempting in part to re-imagine what it means to be human over against this normative capitalist-consumerist discourse. While these protests have a variety of motives, one is the desire for a differently conceived society, a society that is not overridden by simple obedience and servitude to the free market.

Within a confessional Christian context, to be welcomed as members of the body of Christ is deeply counter-cultural. Indeed, the early Christian movement was one of the original “protest” movements in Western civilization, a protest that could invite persecution and execution. Our membership in the body of Christ and our inclusion among the redeemed are premised only on Jesus’ work of redemption—Jesus who calls us not servants but friends (John 15:15). Our primary identity and vocation in this body emerge from God’s gracious self-giving, the self-extension of Love, who desires that we find ourselves not in what we buy and own, but in who we *are*, together. Membership in the body of Christ (experienced primarily through local congregations and parishes) teaches us instead to know our value as indispensable parts of a greater whole (1Cor 12:12-27). Moreover, we are members of a whole that is on a mission toward the God-ordained transformation of humankind and all creation.

It takes a revolution in our thought to see the congregation as the principal mode of participation in our own humanity. We are deeply conditioned to know ourselves as human via the state and the marketplace, but in Christian terms, to be human is to participate in the church, the one body of Christ. We are re-inscribed into that body each time we share in the sacraments and when we reflect together on our life under the Word.

I am not naïvely advocating a return to a nostalgic past when

“everyone” went to Sunday worship and the local church was the centre of the community. I am calling instead for a much more radical view of the congregation or parish as the normative nexus for the expression of our humanity. This is not about church being the centre of our social lives, but about the church being the community in which we learn and grow into the image of Christ. It is here that we discern and exercise our gifts, and are commissioned for service. It is here that our wounds are bound up. It is from here into the world that we are sent. In a cultural milieu that prizes personal achievement and private success, this kind of communitarianism is about as “eccentric” as it gets.

***Third, being human means we are called to be stewards.*** All that God has made on earth seems—incredibly—to be at our disposal. Yet, just as remarkably, God calls us *not* to “dispose” of them at all. The gifts of the land and the treasures underground; the riches of the rivers, lakes and seas; the joyful things in the air—all these we could extract and harvest and kill, manipulate and re-manufacture and throw away. Such behaviours are horrifyingly utilitarian and “centric.” If we live as stewards, however, knowing ourselves to be “eccentric,” we honour the gifts and treasures around us that are sent from God the Centre, preserving and assisting them to flourish.

So also in our relationships: we are called to exercise stewardship of our love for one another, to build one another up, to encourage and help, to weep and celebrate together (1 Thess 5:11). But we routinely harm each other, insult and revile and ignore each other. It is a commonplace to call that behaviour “selfish,” because we know it is “centric.” We have nearly forgotten how to name this as “sinful,” perhaps because that would acknowledge our need for redemption. Finally, we are to be stewards of money, the symbol of our labour (or capital accumulation). At the very least, we need to recover a healthy sense of humility before the One who is truly Lord of all these gifts and whose stewards and servants we are. We cannot claim to “own” anything in an ultimate sense. We are at best temporary guardians, commissioned to protect and preserve all that God loves (Matt 25:14-30). This is indeed a very “eccentric” view of our situation!

***Fourth, being human means we are both sinners and the saved.*** Martin Luther famously described Christians as *simul iustus et*

*peccator*—that is, at once justified and sinful. Our reluctance to address the doctrine of sin and the consequent need of forgiveness stems in part from the cultural script that tells us that we can do it all by ourselves. In the modern West, we are taught to think we are self-made persons, strong, independent *ubermenschen* who have conquered not only communism and terrorism but also the past and its limitations. If we imagine that we are innately perfectible—through hard work, constant acquisition, cleverness and being “nice”—then *sin* is just the silly language of the superstitious past.

The acknowledgement of our sin, then, is to see that our proper dependence is not on consumption or cleverness or niceness, but on the love of Another. It is also to own up to our failure to give and to love as we are called to give and to love. If we think “eccentrically,” we will see ourselves in primary relationship with God and one another, not with what we possess or our clever ideas. Admitting the need for reconciliation is key. The discovery of our true humanness requires repentance, as well as extending and receiving forgiveness, and these in turn require the “eccentric” discovery of the other selves upon whom we depend.

***Finally, to be authentically human is to pattern our lives after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*** What alienates us from our true humanity these days? Too much or not enough work can be dehumanizing. Exclusion and self-exclusion from community can rob us of a fundamental human experience. Poor diet and not enough sleep, through self-neglect or the scarcity of resources, diminish the well-being of our bodies. Abuse by others, and abuse of others, makes the Christ-light in us waver. To be authentically human, in biblical terms, is to grow up into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). This goes far beyond the “teachings of Jesus” to which the Bible is sometimes reduced. The image of Christ in us is the reflection of God’s light in all we do and say and are. Notably, this is a *reflection*, not the source of light, for we are eccentric to it.

Whenever we yearn and learn to love as Jesus did; whenever we pray and remain open to the Holy Spirit of God as Jesus did; whenever we offer a cup of cold water to the thirsty and a word of grace to the rejected as Jesus did; whenever we act “for the least of these” (Matt 25:31-46)—we begin to discover, and to be transformed into, our true

humanity in the image of Christ. We begin to live for others, patterning ourselves after Jesus, whom the gospels present as solitary only on rare occasions. He is constantly with others. Jesus' own communitarianism drove him to be with disciples and among the crowds. The character of his compassionate love and self-giving, replayed over and over in his life and penultimately in his death, takes its final form in the resurrection. In the resurrection we see God's desire for a finally transformed humanity: a humanity in which fear is banished, doubt yields to faith, peace is breathed upon all, food is shared, vocations are commissioned, and joy is complete. All these gifts flow from the heart of God.

As he came to the end of the worst part of his grief following his wife's death, C.S. Lewis wrote of God's "grand enterprise" to make of us "an organism which is also a spirit; to make that terrible oxymoron, a 'spiritual animal.' To take a poor primate, a beast with nerve-endings all over it, a creature with a stomach that wants to be filled, a breeding animal that wants its mate, and say, 'Now get on with it. Become a god.'"<sup>3</sup>

We owe much to those who would help us to see our place and participation in the life of God, including the Progressive Christians of the current time. But we also need to know ourselves not as self-sufficiently clever and spiritually independent. We are invited to see all things in the light of God's love and wisdom, which are *greater* than our own. We need to understand ourselves as forgiven sinners, whose redemption is tied up with each other person's redemption and that of the whole cosmos. Finally, the gift of hope that God gives us, in whatever form it appears, must be received as a gift from a Giver, and not merely fine rational thought or best personal wishes. We have much about which to be thankful and to celebrate in our "eccentricity," as members of Christ's body, and as stewards of a rich inheritance from the Source of all.

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<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* [1961] (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 72.

## **FROM THE HEART—ABOUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER** **by Marguerite van Die**

As a twelve-year-old in a Dutch immigrant Christian Reformed community I was catapulted into “the heart of the Christian faith” by the 129 questions and answers of the sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism. Beginning with the confession “that I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ” and ending with a detailed exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, its doctrinal statements were a challenge, a mystery and more than often a bore to the young captive audience assembled on Friday nights in a church basement. Attempts to grasp the meaning and implications of its heady teaching became the subject of many a conversation with my father on the return trip home from weekly catechism classes.

Theological discussion was part of our immigrant culture, and young people so inclined could further hone their understanding by eavesdropping whenever family and friends gathered Sundays over coffee in various homes and dissected the minister’s sermon. Few had more than an elementary education, but, by dint of evening classes, debates in church societies and through private reading, the speakers (largely male with a few intrepid female participants) displayed an impressive, if not always irenic, theological knowledge. Christian faith mattered, and for all of us, young and old, it was almost impossible to imagine a worldview that was not in some form or other Christian.

What was true for Dutch immigrants in the late 1950s also held true for many Canadians. While they might not have been drilled in the niceties of Calvinist theology, most assumed that theirs was a Christian society. Few realized the seismic change that Canadian church life was already beginning to undergo. Only a decade later historian John Webster Grant would observe: “The image of a Christian Canada—churchgoing, moral, and devotedly partisan—strikes both believers and unbelievers today as somewhat archaic. Whether we like this image or not, it is unlikely that the church will have sufficient authority in our time to replace it with another.” With that loss of authority, many of my generation shook the dust off their feet, ceased attending church, and apparently have never looked back.

For reasons unknown, perhaps the need to probe the mysteries of

the Heidelberg Catechism, I am not one of those. Instead, I have spent much of my adult life researching the historical interplay of Christianity and culture in Canada, and until my recent retirement, teaching the history of Christianity at Queen's University to undergraduates and to students preparing for ministry, primarily in The United Church of Canada. This work and my own faith journey have been guided by the words of an early twentieth-century Canadian Methodist and social gospel preacher, Salem Bland: "God's truth comes to us in fragments." I'd like briefly to elaborate and also suggest a few applications to the current context.

Since 1985, when I began teaching at Queen's, an increasing number of undergraduates, and even theology students, have come with little, if any, meaningful exposure to organized Christianity and its basic terminology. As members of a denomination only formed in 1925, and one that prides itself in being "cutting edge," there was also resistance among some theologues to a subject whose relevance to the formation of pastoral identity was not readily evident. All of this made my task pretty straightforward: to present Christianity as a complex and varied historical religion, an immense storehouse of thought-provoking experiences, personalities and problems, to which a person could turn again and again for wisdom and insight.

One should not blame United Church theology students for cavalierly dismissing the past. In my early research I had focused on the transition, prior to union, to a more liberal evangelicalism—open to such new scientific currents of the late nineteenth century as the higher criticism and Darwinian evolution. I admired the optimism of a generation driven by a vision of the kingdom of God on earth, but I also marvelled at how lightly they travelled theologically. Convinced that theirs was an age of progress, they confidently proclaimed that finally "the dust and grime of centuries" had been swept away in order to reveal Christianity in its simple scriptural form. Idealistically dispensing with the scaffolding of ancient creeds, and uncomfortable with doctrines such as original sin, they did not realize that theirs was only a way station and not the culmination of the Christian story.

A century later, in a world that has stared into the face of evil in ways they could not have imagined, that scaffolding can again offer powerful insight into the human condition and its connection to the

divine. For me, and I hope also for my students, one of the most helpful resources for realizing this has been a course in historical Christology based on Jaroslav Pelikan's book, *Jesus through the Centuries*. Drawing on its chronological discussions, supplemented by art, music, and original texts, the course was shaped by Pelikan's assertion that "for each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often, the answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny." By placing doctrine within its changing historical contexts, such topics as the early christological controversies, Augustine's doctrine of divine grace in the light of human sin, Francis of Assisi's humility, and the rationalist and romantic Christ figures of the Enlightenment all become more accessible and immediate. Awareness of Christianity's many different forms also undercuts any tendency students might have to see as normative the particular form with which they happened to be familiar.

"Only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (*Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II). For me personally, and no doubt also for some of the students, belief in God and the Spirit has always represented much less of a challenge than belief in the second person of the Trinity. In connecting doctrine to culture and human concerns, Pelikan's approach plumbs from many different angles the deep mystery of the Incarnation, the Word Made Flesh. In this way it transcends any attempt to examine Christian belief only from the head (as had been the case in my own early encounter with doctrine). Instead, it requires engagement also of the heart, of the whole self.

Recent developments have helpfully incorporated this integrated understanding into the writing and teaching of history. Commonly referred to as "lived religion," this method emphasizes religion's dialectical relationship with the social, and does not assume any previous familiarity with the religious practice under investigation. Instead, like outsiders seeking to understand an unfamiliar society, a new generation of scholars of religious history in a secular age are more like anthropologists than intellectual or institutional specialists, as was formerly the case. Institutions, denominations, theologies, and doctrinal teachings remain part of the context they examine, but the focus is much more on what people actually make of these. As a result, historians (and their students)

have to step out of their own familiar world and ask themselves what it was that people in a given period were able to desire, express and fantasize. Why, for example, did a rich imagery of heaven figure so prominently in nineteenth-century accounts of death, only to disappear almost entirely in our own time?

Texts now become more than words and include knowledge of the body, an awareness of what people tasted, felt, smelled, heard. Thus the luxuriant imagery of blood in atonement discourse, which many today find offensive, had resonance in a time when people were much less immunized to pain and suffering. Excavated with care, skill, and observation, practices and beliefs that could easily be derided or criticized instead become the subject of informed understanding.

Rather than seeing the religious past as dead and its actors as “other,” students are encouraged to explore to what extent their own circumstances as thinking, feeling people, caught in the complexities of daily life, can provide at least an entry into people’s religious experience. Such an approach would not have been possible if the moral authority of the old Christian Canada were still in place, and it simply were assumed that the knowledge of institutions and theology constituted an understanding of Christianity. Overlooked would have been the messiness, the contradictions, and the tensions that were (and are) part of lived religion, and of life more generally.

How does all this pertain to a church historian’s confession “from the heart about the heart of the matter”? By approaching the past through the lens of “lived religion,” historians within a secular society can demonstrate how intimately religion has been part of people’s social, economic, and intellectual experience. At the same time, by sharpening perception of religion’s presence within the warp and woof of daily life in the past, this method also raises awareness of the many ways in which the quest for the sacred continues to shape people’s negotiation of daily life. Faith is then seen never to be static but always sensitive to the context of its practitioners.

It is a matter of common sense, but often forgotten, that the world that parents bequeath to their children is not the world their children inherit. The faith of my Dutch immigrant community or of United Church members in the 1950s could not become that of their children. The

massive de-Christianization of the intervening period had permanently displaced such an option. What this also has done, however, is to open a space for new approaches to religion in the academy, and also in congregational ministry. The two terrains became one in a course on evangelism in a post-Christian society, a course that brought to the classroom practitioner guest speakers from a wide variety of United Church congregations. Exploring the changing role of the church in Canada, they shared how they as ordained ministers and lay leaders were responding to the challenges and availing themselves of opportunities for Christian renewal. Their presentations, along with recent thoughtful literature on the dialectic between current context and the recovery of ancient practices (see Brian McLaren among others), are a forceful reminder that, for Christians, change and renewal are constant companions. Where once, in my youth, and in our country's youth, Christianity was a given, today its contours are more complex. God's truth does indeed come to us in fragments. Yet, as I grow older, I see its pursuit as more rewarding, as demanding a deeper self-knowledge and a keener awareness of the fragility and ambiguity of everyday life, not only in the past, but also in the present.

## PROFILE

### “THE TIME OF BUSINESS DOES NOT DIFFER WITH ME FROM THE TIME OF PRAYER”: EUNICE PYFROM, 1906-1986

by Betsy Anderson

#### Introduction

I first came across Eunice Pyfrom while doing some research in the Five Oaks archives. Reading the history of the *Five Oaks Centre: Its Roots and Growth* compiled by Jean Oaten, Bev Oaten's wife, I discovered that Eunice Pyfrom's report on the newly launched Naramata Centre in British Columbia in 1947 was the final step in the emergence of the Five Oaks dream.<sup>1</sup>

Like so many women in the church, Eunice Pyfrom was the background woman who helped things happen and whose practical work and diverse abilities undergirded the emergence of institutions and movements which have shaped the United Church and many of its members. I encountered Eunice more recently through my McGeachy Senior Scholarship research into the *History of Howland House*, the Student Christian Movement Co-operative House in Toronto, 1953-1975, that grew out of the Student-in-Industry Work Camp movement, launched in 1945 in Welland, Ontario. And who organized that pioneering work camp in the last years of World War II?—why Eunice Pyfrom, of course!

#### Biography

Eunice Pyfrom was born in Hamilton, Ontario, on 2 August 1906. She attended Central Collegiate Middle School in Hamilton from 1920 to 1924 and graduated from Hamilton Business College in 1925. She worked as a bookkeeper in the Royal Bank in Hamilton and as private secretary to the manager from 1925 to 1936. In 1936-37 she attended Albert College in Belleville before working for the United Church's Committee of Missionary Education, 1937-39, and the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) Literature Department, 1939-41, in Toronto.

Eunice worked as a public school inspector and for a law office in Huntsville, 1941-42, and then for the Muskoka United Parish as a WMS associate worker, 1942-43, promoting weaving, study groups and credit

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Oaten, *Five Oaks Centre: Its Roots and Growth* (Paris, Ontario: Five Oaks, n.d.), 12.

unions. In the fall of 1943 Eunice entered the two-year program at the United Church Training School (UCTS) in its war-time location at 214 St. George St., Toronto, for training as a WMS worker. While at the UCTS, Eunice participated in the school's Student Christian Movement (SCM) unit where members collected monies for the International Students Service for refugees and people in prison camps, organized discussions on anti-Semitism, race issues and different Christian forms of worship, and participated in social events with other SCM units on the University of Toronto campus.<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1944 she explored the Larger Parish approach to rural ministry through a placement in the Green Mountain Parish in Vermont with the New England Town and Country Commission. The Larger Parish movement received its title from Rev. Harlow S. Mills' 1914 book, *The Making of a Country Parish*. Its hallmarks included an intentional ministry to all people in the area, not only those in one's own church, and the idea that a larger, specialized staff in rural areas could meet the broad needs of a large and disparate rural community. In a letter to Miss Constance Chappell at the Women's Missionary Society, about her experience in Vermont, Eunice states:

If there were more evidences of the active development of some such progressive plan for rural work there would be a greater desire on the part of well-qualified leadership to stay with the rural field . . . There should be "roving commissions" to discover and study areas, and develop plans and programs for cooperative rural work. Perhaps it is up to the women of the Church to make the move . . . I should like to find a place somewhere in the framework of such a development.<sup>3</sup>

Eunice graduated in 1945 in a class of 20 other women<sup>4</sup> who would

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<sup>2</sup> Minute Book for Classes of 1940-45, Centre for Christian Studies, 98.101C 10-16, UCC Archives, Toronto.

<sup>3</sup> 5 February 1945 letter from Eunice Pyfrom to Constance Chappell, Centre for Christian Studies, 98.101C, UCC Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Archibald (Colborne), Isobel Rae Benham (Anderson), Leslie Bowman (Keays), Frances Brownlee (Carnochan), Florence Danby (Patterson), Anne Davison (Storey), Elizabeth Facey, Edith Grizzle (Jones), Elinor Harwood (Laird), Esther Highfield, Mary MacDougall, Alice MacKay (Halfpenny), Margaret Mann (Assels), Beatrice McGain, Oona Meggitt (Shields), Agnes Oliver (Thompson), Marjorie Robson, Dorothy Skinner (Vogan), Phyllis Sykes and Mary Tatchell.

influence the mission and ministry of the United Church in many fields at home and abroad. She joined the WMS and was appointed as an Evangelistic Worker in the Algoma and Temiskaming Presbyteries. However, a year later she resigned from the WMS and for five years staffed the Christian Work Camp Fellowship (previously called the Canadian Work Camp Committee) until, at the age of 46, she accepted the Rev. Bev Oaten's call to Five Oaks. She worked for twelve years, ostensibly as dietician and cook managing the Five Oaks kitchen, but lent her multiple skills to all aspects of the fledgling organization's needs. She, Bev and Jean celebrated their "retirement" at the same party on 1 July 1964.

Eunice Pyfrom left Five Oaks in the summer of 1964 and moved to Olivet United Church in Hamilton as Director of Christian Education. The Sunday School at Olivet numbered 833, with an average attendance of 583 when she arrived in 1964. Ministry colleagues during her ten years of service included the Rev. Carl Zurbrigg, Dr. Howard Outerbridge and the Rev. Howard Brox.<sup>5</sup> Continuing her practice of meeting needs as they emerged, she returned to her early vocation as administrative secretary for the congregation in the last years of her ministry there.

Eunice died on January 13, 1986. Her funeral was held at Olivet on Wednesday, January 22, with the Rev. Lloyd Stapleton presiding. Tributes were offered by Bill Smith and her former colleagues, Howard Brox and Carl Zurbrigg.

### **The Christian Work Camp Fellowship**

Bev Oaten, Minister of Colborne St. United Church in Brantford from 1941 to 1952, was the visionary for, and first director of, the Five Oaks Christian Worker's Education Centre in Paris, Ontario. He also was a key actor in the emergence of volunteer service work camps through the Canadian Work Camp Committee and then the Christian Work Camp Fellowship. The date of the establishment of the CWCC is unclear, but by 1941 it emerges in the record<sup>6</sup> with Bev Oaten as Chair and, following the 1941 work camp in Muskoka, Eunice Pyfrom as Secretary.

The first volunteer work camp included 16 participants—students,

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<sup>5</sup> Eunice Pyfrom Biography File, UCC Archives, Toronto.

<sup>6</sup> Article reprinted from "The Pathfinder," Acc. No. 85.076C, File 2-13, UCC Archives, Toronto.

ministers and workers who took holiday time and paid \$1.00 a day to be part of this work camp experience. Participants offered Vacation Bible Schools, painted and repaired church buildings and grounds, and built weaving looms for the Muskoka Community Project. Campers were billeted but met together for worship and breakfast, and again at night for supper and study, followed by closing worship.

In 1942, work camps of two or three weeks were planned in Muskoka, the Cobalt area, Simcoe County and North Frontenac in Ontario and also in Saskatchewan.<sup>7</sup> In 1943 a work camp of about 25 people helped to build a recreation hall in a war-time housing neighbourhood of Hamilton.

In the summer of 1945, the National SCM and the CWCC joined forces to organize the inaugural summer-long student-in-industry work camp in Welland, Ontario. In the camp log, Eunice wrote:

Up until this summer the Canadian Work Camp Committee had been largely interested and responsible for the sponsoring of short term volunteer work camps. However during the spring of 1945 the committee members put their resources and energy into a Student-In-Industry Work Camp. In brief, the idea was to bring students together to live as a cooperative Christian community and at the same time to work in factories. The non-working hours of the students would then be directed to study and community interests. The project was wholeheartedly supported by the SCM who recruited students from the various universities.<sup>8</sup>

The story of this work camp, the movement it spawned and the theology and ministry formation it engendered is the topic of another paper.<sup>9</sup> However, Eunice's account in the camp log of the preparations required to "open a Student-in-Industry Work Camp" gives us a marvellous sense of her as a person and is a fine case study in the social history of the time and the multiple skills, confidence and ingenuity needed to bring this formative venture into being. One notes that she also was finishing her

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Giant Forge Work Camp Log, File 121-10, 1985.076C, UCC Archives, Toronto.

<sup>9</sup> Betsy Anderson, "The place where 'men' earn their bread is to be the place of holiness." *Proceedings of the Canadian Society of Church History*, 28-30 May 2011.

studies, working as a student minister at Fisherville United Church, just outside Toronto, and preparing to graduate from the UCTS.

On a 1947 Canadian speaking tour in support of the Iona Community, and, while fund-raising for the restoration of the Abbey, George McLeod stated, “The Canadian student work camps have chosen a simpler and better approach to the rediscovery of the essential unity of work, worship and faith, than we in Iona.”<sup>10</sup> For the SCM, the Welland work camp became the model for more than 60 work camps affecting at least 1000 student participants during the course of over 25 years.

After the 1945 summer work camp, Eunice left for her year of service with the WMS, but returned to Toronto in 1946 to staff the Christian Work Camp Fellowship offices on Maitland St. In 1947, with Bev Oaten as Director and a volunteer board including representatives of the SCM, she organized at least five volunteer work camps in B.C., Alberta and Ontario, and one agricultural and two student-in-industry work camps with the SCM. Eunice Pyfrom was key to their existence and the experience they offered Christians, especially young adult Christians in the United Church.

During her time on staff for the CWCF she also travelled and represented Canada at gatherings of the international ecumenical movement. She is pictured with others from the Canadian adult delegation that joined the 250-strong Canadian student delegation at the North American Student Conference, 27 December 1947 to 1 January 1948 at the University of Kansas. A report, written by Earl Leard, was published on the front page of the 1 February 1948 issue of *The Observer*. Eunice was one of three United Church women present at the first World Council of Churches Assembly in Amsterdam in 1949.<sup>11</sup> In 1951, the SCM National Council decided to take sole responsibility for the Student Work Camps and established their own Work Camp Committee. The CWCF continued to organize volunteer work camps and the record shows that students in SCM work camps periodically joined a CWCF volunteer work camp for a weekend. It was not long after this that Eunice joined Bev and Jean Oaten as a volunteer and then as a staff member at Five Oaks.

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<sup>10</sup> *The United Church Observer*, 1 April 1947, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> The other two were Harriet Christie, Principal of the United Church Training School and Deaconess Dorothy Young, national staff member of the Women’s Missionary Society.

### **The Five Oaks Christian Workers Education Centre**

The story of Five Oaks is testimony to the power of faith, call and determination to create a Christian worker's education centre that would train and form laity for ministry and witness in the work world. "The work camp philosophy of the close relationship of work and worship was one of the foundation stones in the building of Five Oaks,"<sup>12</sup> as was the commitment to learning and witness as the ministry of the laity in the world.

Eunice was the second employee hired by Bev Oaten in 1952, joining Isabel Squires, famous for her Bible studies and adult Christian education. Eunice's many skills were key once again, finding supplies, ordering, organizing and cooking food, and attending to the many details necessary to the running of the place for 12 years from 1952-1964. Isabel said of Eunice that she "was among them all the most accomplished. She could of course drive nails, she could cook for quantity, she could sand floors. She could drive a truck, she could write a project and give a moving, illustrated talk on work camps in devastated Europe."<sup>13</sup>

"The spirit of the Five Oaks community is well expressed in the Brother Lawrence plaque made by Eunice Pyfrom which hangs in the kitchen to remind us of the spiritual value of daily work and that 'the time of business does not differ for me from the time of prayer.'"<sup>14</sup> The spirit Eunice brought to her work and her prayer brought results and permeated the spirit of Five Oaks in her time and subsequently.

Rena Newberry, on furlough as a missionary in 1954 and attending an orientation for new missionaries at Five Oaks, wrote for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary:

There were perhaps 20 of us at the long table for lunch that day. What kind of meal would Eunice Pyfrom prepare? . . . It tasted good and there was dessert—cake with raisins in it and on top of that, the blessing of a wonderful gift of cinnamon sauce, quite unnecessary, an extra gift. That cinnamon sauce still speaks to me of the life of Five Oaks. All the elements of prayer, study, inspiration, food and shelter are there as promised. But on

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Oaten, *Five Oaks*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

top of all that the over-and-above gifts of beauty and fun and affection.<sup>15</sup>

### Significance for the Church

In *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass proposes 12 *practices* as “those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.”<sup>16</sup> Those practices include hospitality, household economics, keeping the Sabbath, testimony, discernment and shaping communities. In her multiple ministries as administrator, cook, public speaker, Christian educator, ecumenist and church leader, Eunice embodied these practices and invited others to share in the many forms of Christian community.

Gerda Lerner describes a phenomenon in women's history where “women perceived a social or community need, began to meet it in practical, unstructured ways, then continued to expand their efforts into building a small institution, often financed by funds they raised through voluntary activities. Usually, when the institution had existed long enough and established itself, it became incorporated . . . . At this point it would also—incidentally—enter history, its official status, making of its records historical sources. The women who had done the work, if they appeared in the record at all, would be visible only as a ladies auxiliary group or as unpaid, unrecognized volunteers.”<sup>17</sup>

With Eunice Pyfrom we recognize again the unsung role of women—by no means unique in the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is the dynamic of hard and effective work carried out by women leaders in the church—whether unpaid missionaries, or ministers’ wives, or ill-paid women workers or deaconesses—to bring into existence a vision, often articulated and promoted by a charismatic man. I would not diminish the passion and vision of the men in these instances, but rather look for, lift up and celebrate the essential work of the women, whose practical and skilled efforts often brought the vision to life, gifting us all.

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<sup>15</sup> Jocelyn Bell, *The Story of Five Oaks: Fifty Years in the Life of an Education Centre* (Paris, Ontario: Five Oaks, 2001), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997), xi.

<sup>17</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 179.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy.*

Eric Metaxas. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010. Pp. 591.

This is the first major biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in over forty years, and it's a page turner. Metaxas takes full advantage of biographical material that has surfaced of late. We learn, for example, that long before Bonhoeffer fell in love with 18 year old Maria von Wedemeyer he enjoyed an eight year romantic relationship with Elizabeth Zinn, a fellow theologian. There's nothing wrong with that, but why didn't Bethge tell us about this important relationship in his "definitive" biography in 1967? It only makes one wonder what else Bethge failed to include.

Again and again Metaxas tells all, and yet Bonhoeffer still comes up smelling like roses. Metaxas himself, mind you, has been criticized for reading into Bonhoeffer's life more of an American evangelical influence than the facts allow.

Still, I don't see why it's the biographer's fault that Bonhoeffer pilloried so severely the thin academic theology that he encountered at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930:

There is no theology here . . . They talk a blue streak without the slightest substantive foundation and with no evidence of any criteria. The students—on the average twenty-five to thirty years old—are completely clueless with respect to what dogmatics is really about. They are unfamiliar with even the most basic questions. They become intoxicated with liberal and humanistic phrases, laugh at the fundamentalists, and yet basically are not even up to their level (101).

Or why should it be Metaxas' fault that Bonhoeffer left Riverside Church that year after a couple of Sundays of Fosdick's theological pablum and began attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem where he heard the gospel preached with power and social application?

Bonhoeffer was clearly impressed with the Baptists and it wasn't just because they were black. He spent the rest of his year in New York worshipping in that evangelical church and teaching Sunday school there. He also became, for the first time in his life, a regular churchgoer. The German student still made friends in Union with fellow students such as

Paul Lehmann. But let's not kid ourselves. It was the evangelicals that turned Bonhoeffer's spiritual crank in New York.

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was soon forced to deal with Nazism and the complicit response on the part of so many—even within the breakaway Confessing Church. New to me here was how many members of Bonhoeffer's family and friends were in high positions in the German military and government. That's how, in fact, Bonhoeffer learned so much earlier than the general populace about the atrocities taking place in the concentration camps.

New also was how much resistance Bonhoeffer encountered within the Confessing Church when he declared it the duty of the church to stand up for the Jews. Even one of the students in his underground seminary put forth the theory about the "curse" upon the Jews as a way of explaining *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, in 1938. Far more radically and biblically, Bonhoeffer saw the Nazi attack upon the Jews and their synagogues as nothing less than an attack upon God: "He who touches you touches the apple of my eye."

Metaxas vividly describes the several assassination attempts on Hitler. The conspirators get so close so often and yet remain so far! And then, before you know it, 500 pages have slipped by and we're in a van with Bonhoeffer and thirteen other prisoners lurching through the night on the way to the extermination camp in Flossenburg.

Except that they are turned away! Flossenburg doesn't want them. They are free now, or certainly very close to freedom. The group eventually ends up in a state prison. Then the next day they find themselves in the van again, heading southeast. This is even better. They're moving farther and farther away from the fighting. The following day they arrive at a small Bavarian village called Schönberg.

Here they join other political prisoners, all smelling freedom. The next day happens to be Easter and the men naturally want to give thanks. Somebody asks Dietrich to preach. He eventually agrees and explains the texts of the day (Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 1:3). The service has just concluded when the door opens and—"Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us."

A mistake has been made. Bonhoeffer is wanted back at Flossenburg after all. He takes a fellow prisoner aside and whispers, "This is the end."

For me the beginning of life” (528). And so it proved to be.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced the Nazi menace in his day. Today the great menace would seem to be global warming. Both Nazism and global warming are killers on an unimaginable scale. This book is a reminder of what it takes to face the beast with real Christian courage and hope.

*John McTavish, Huntsville, Ontario*  
*jmctav@vianet.ca*

***Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations.***

**Terence L. Donaldson. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press/London: SPCK, 2010. Pp. xi +176.**

Over the last sixty years, Christians have done much soul searching over the relationship between the Holocaust and Christian anti-Judaism. Can Christianity be separated from anti-Jewish sentiments? Is the New Testament itself anti-Jewish, or has it been misused to justify anti-Judaism? It is this latter question that Terence L. Donaldson, Lord and Lady Coggan Professor of New Testament at Wycliffe College, addresses in this book.

Donaldson’s discussion primarily deals with four New Testament authors: Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul, although a final chapter touches on other NT books and the NT canon as a whole. His discussion of Matthew concentrates on Matthew 27:25, which portrays the Jewish people calling down upon themselves and their children the guilt for Jesus’ death. The chapter on Luke-Acts focuses on Paul’s declaration to the Jews in Rome that God’s salvation has now been sent to the Gentiles (Acts 28:28). Donaldson’s treatment of John begins with Jesus’ statement that the Jews have the devil as their father (John 8:44). Finally, the chapter on Paul focuses on two particularly troublesome remarks: 1 Thessalonians 2:16, which claims that God’s wrath has overtaken the Jews, and Galatians 4:30, which calls the Galatians to separate themselves from those calling them to undergo circumcision.

In his introduction, Donaldson builds upon Douglas Hare’s typology of anti-Judaisms: prophetic, Jewish-Christian, and gentilizing. The first type criticizes Jewish society for a lack of faithfulness to its

covenant, while at the same time existing within Jewish society. The second type exists as a sect within Jewish society, criticizing that society for failing to receive Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah, but holding out hope that the Jewish people will come to faith in Jesus. The third type exists apart from Jewish society and believes that God has abandoned Israel for the (predominantly, if not exclusively) Gentile church (17-18). Donaldson argues that the first two forms of anti-Judaism are not deeply anti-Jewish, for both identify with Jews and seek, in their criticism, to bring about their good (at least as these authors conceive of good). In contrast, the third category is anti-Jewish in that it views the Jewish people as Other and its criticism is not intended to benefit Jews, but to condemn them (19).

Donaldson rightly argues that, to assess whether or not a New Testament writer is guilty of anti-Judaism, one must first contextualize, both historically and socially, the writer and his community. Additionally, one must determine the rhetorical function of the author's remarks before one can accuse the author of anti-Judaism. Donaldson asks these very questions of Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul, and concludes that they are not anti-Judaic. This conclusion does not render their remarks or portrayals of Jews entirely benign, and Donaldson rightly notes the horrific consequences that the statements of these authors have had over the last 2000 years. Donaldson argues that, as early Christians came to understand "Christianity" to be a Gentile religion, entirely at odds with the religion of "Judaism," the prophetic/Jewish-Christian criticisms of the NT authors were transformed into gentilizing anti-Judaism (150).

By nature, introductory books such as this one cannot discuss all the scholarly literature on a topic. Yet I would have liked to see Donaldson address the argument that the statement "His blood be upon us and our children" in Matthew functions to signify not only Jewish culpability, but also recognition that Jesus' blood atones for Jewish guilt. I also wondered how he would respond to the arguments of certain scholars who claim that two problematic texts he focuses on in Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:16 and Galatians 4:30) are non-Pauline interpolations. I imagine that he finds such theories more theologically convenient than exegetically convincing, but I would have appreciated his thoughts on these attempts to wrestle with such difficult texts.

Nonetheless, this book serves admirably as an introduction to the topics of Christian anti-Judaism and the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. Donaldson's treatment is judicious and fair, weighing the scholarly arguments against one another and against the biblical data. In a time when tensions and indeed intolerance, religious and otherwise, are on the rise, Donaldson's book serves as a sobering reminder: our words might have unintended effects on others.

*Matthew Thiessen, Saskatoon  
matthew.thiessen@usask.ca*

***Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining.***

**Shelly Rambo. Foreword by Catherine Keller. Louisville, KY:  
Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. Pp. xiv+186.**

This well written book begins with a visit to New Orleans, twenty-nine months after it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Media attention has moved on. There is "a great push to claim that New Orleans is back to normal" (1). But much of the devastation remains. As one resident puts it, "The storm is gone, but the 'after the storm is always here'" (2). Rambo uses this phrase to describe how traumatic events end, yet the trauma they cause remains. Those who experience it live in a middle space between death and life. According to Rambo, Christian theology's message that Jesus' death was overcome by his resurrection "elides" this truth. Rambo turns to Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday for a theology that remains and thinks from this middle space.

Balthasar drew on Adrienne von Speyr's mystical experiences of Holy Saturday, in which she saw a trickle of love emerging from Jesus' cross after his death. It is a love that has survived Jesus' death but remains marked by it (57). After reflecting on this, Rambo turns to the account of Jesus' death and the farewell discourses in John's Gospel. She argues that Mary and the beloved disciple witness not to the presence of the risen Jesus with his disciples, but to the Spirit, the *paraclete* that enables them to witness both to the trauma of Jesus' death and to the love that remains after it (103-104). Rambo calls this the "middle Spirit" (114). It is a love that bears witness to all that has been lost in traumatic events. It enables people to "remain" with Jesus (103-104) and bear witness to the lingering

effects of trauma, and not succumb to the temptation to cover these over by proclaiming a triumphal resurrection.

Rambo, drawing on the work of Dan McAdams, argues that Americans are addicted to redemptive narratives that lead through fall and loss to recovery and transformation (146). In an argument reminiscent of Douglas Hall's critique of North American official optimism, she describes this as an ideology that glosses over traumatic suffering and loss. Rambo sees her notion of middle Spirit as critiquing this and presenting a realism enabling one to acknowledge the pain and loss of trauma and continue living amidst it.

This is an arresting book, critical of Christian triumphalism that distorts Jesus' resurrection into an ideology of success and false hope that represses suffering and loss, and flees from those who live with these. But is hope born of Jesus' resurrection responsible for the mass media moving on to new stories with the result that attention is diverted away from victims of Hurricane Katrina, who must cope with its devastation long after other events have become front page news? Or is this diversion of attention the result of a need continually to present new news and intrinsic to the way mass media functions?

Trauma sufferer and Pauline scholar Christiaan Beker was also critical of false understandings of Christian hope that lead people to flee or deny suffering and loss. But he affirmed the radical hope articulated by Paul, based on Jesus' death and resurrection, as an important resource for living with trauma. Beker argued that ambivalence was a necessary part of Christian life. Christians must live in the tension between ongoing suffering and the hope Christ's resurrection brings, and not attempt to flee it. But according to Beker it is precisely this hope that gives Christians the patience and fortitude to live in this tension, and that inspires them to work to overcome what suffering they can. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued that without images of hope like that of Jesus' resurrection and his proclamation of the reign of God, society easily becomes cynical, accustomed to suffering and loss, and forsakes solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed.

Still, though Rambo's critique of Christian hope springing from Jesus' resurrection may be overdrawn and one-sided, it is an important reminder of how unredeemed much of life is. Christian hope is only

authentic when it recognizes the abiding feeling that, even long after “the storm is gone,” the effect of “after the storm is always here” (2). Rambo also offers a fascinating depiction of how the Holy Spirit is often present, not as a flame or rushing wind, but as a weary trickle of love abiding in and with the wounded, a trickle that refuses to move on while trauma remains. This important, thought-provoking book will be useful for seminary students, clergy and Christian care-givers.

*Don Schweitzer, St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon  
don.schweitzer@usask.ca*

***Drawing from the Same Well: The St. Brigid Report.***

**A Report of the Anglican-United Church Dialogue 2003-2009.  
Toronto: The General Synod of The Anglican Church of  
Canada and The United Church of Canada, 2009. Pp. 6.**

The well known hymn “The Church’s One Foundation,” with its resounding tune, reminds us and declares to the world that our charter of salvation is “one Lord, one faith, one birth.” This hymn can be found in the hymn books of many of the denominations of the body of Christ, but it is #146 in what is known in the vernacular as “the red hymn book.” Officially the book is entitled “The Hymn Book of The Anglican Church of Canada and The United Church of Canada.” The preface states that “the two Committees of Ten of the two Churches appointed to study the problems of church union and prepare a document on the Principles of Union, resolved that ‘the two Committees of Ten meeting jointly . . . urge upon their respective governing bodies the possibility of producing a common hymn book.’” And it was so.

But that was 1971 and we know that the organic church union envisioned did not come to pass. Thirty two years later, the introductory letter of *Drawing from the Same Well: The Saint Brigid Report* states:

In winter 2003, twelve persons named by The Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) and The United Church of Canada (UCC) met in Vancouver to consider their new mandate to explore the relationship between our two churches. It was clear to us from the outset that we were not commissioned to prepare plans for a new “church union,” a successor to the failed project of the

1970s. What we should make our task was initially less obvious. The question is what the proclamation of “one Lord, one faith, one birth” actually looks like on the ground, in the pews, in the wider ministry of the Anglican and United Churches.

More helpful and quite possible, in the mind of this reviewer, might have been an attempt to explain why the people of these two denominations should care about the Report and, more importantly, its exploration of the relationship of the two denominations. The St. Brigid Report assumes that they should and perhaps in 2003 that was an assumption one could make but not in 2009, I think, and certainly not in 2011. *Touchstone* clearly cares, but in the current context in which some denominations seem preoccupied with financial and attendance issues, what role does a body like this and a report like this play in the pews?

In its exploration of “The Unity We Share,” “Ecumenical Shared Ministries,” “Doctrine: The Blessing and the Challenge,” “The Wider Context of Ecumenism,” and subsequent sections, the Report certainly mentions such bodies as The Canadian Council of Churches (CCC). However, speaking from a perspective of broad and diverse ecumenism, it must be said that a more intentional theological statement on the imperative to ecumenism would be helpful to any dialogue and such a statement seems missing.

Moreover, there is a general tendency throughout the document to perceive differences between the denominations as a negative factor. Page 24, for example, declares that “differences of belief are not necessarily fatal to relations.” Yet it has been the recent experience of the twenty-three denominations of the CCC in consensus ecumenism that differences of belief can actually enhance relations if approached with respect, trust and prayer. A similar point can be made for the conclusions on page 32 and 33. It is clearly articulated that “ecumenism is not optional—it is not just something nice to do.” However, there is no articulation of why ecumenism is not optional, an important question for the people of the ACC and UCC across the nation to whom the Report is directed. In spite of this point, however, the Report’s section on doctrine as a whole and its focused conclusions could and should be required reading for many in the ACC, UCC and beyond.

The St. Brigid Report knows that it is, if not a beginning of bilateral dialogue between The Anglican Church of Canada and The United Church of Canada, then it is a new kind of dialogue. May the work, the theology, the prayer and the listening continue as the ACC and the UCC, in the broadness and diversity of the ecumenical context, continue to discern what it looks like in the world to witness to one Lord, one faith, one birth.

*Karen Hamilton, The Canadian Council of Churches, Toronto*  
hamilton@councilofchurches.ca

***Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians.***

**Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale. Louisville, KY:  
Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Pp. 192.**

In the first chapter, Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale say this about Bonhoeffer's life: "It started in a relatively idyllic time when terms such as 'world war,' 'fascism' and 'genocide' were not yet part of the European lexicon"(1). This one sentence contains the thesis of the book. Where many of the accounts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and work have been just that, studies of *either* his life or work, Haynes and Hale show that Bonhoeffer's evolving theology went hand in hand with his changing life circumstances. The authors make it quite clear to all their readers, regardless of their familiarity with the subject, that to understand the theological concepts Bonhoeffer presented, one must also understand his life.

The book, latest in the Armchair series by Westminster/John Knox Press, is a wonderfully presented and thoughtful description of Bonhoeffer's contribution to current theology. It achieves its goal in introducing the life and work of Bonhoeffer to newcomers, as well as to reacquaint, in an exciting way, those who may have been studying Bonhoeffer's theology for years. Haynes and Hale put tremendous thought into describing the often complicated thinking of Bonhoeffer, using language that is accessible, yet erudite enough for even the most academic of minds. Ron Hill's illustrations, found throughout the book, interject powerful, and sometimes humorous, visuals into otherwise complicated concepts and situations.

The book is divided into six chapters which then are broken into three distinct sections. The first is an exploration of Bonhoeffer's life which includes a biography of his heritage and the explanation of some of the most important and fundamental times of his life, such as his year at Union Theological Seminary in New York and his development of, and life within, the community of Finkenwalde. Haynes and Hale also discuss Bonhoeffer's limitations. In chapter one they point out that Bonhoeffer, though committed to what he believed, was still a man of his time. Where many today choose to see Bonhoeffer only as the great Christian thinker who stood up to tyranny, Haynes and Hale remind readers that even though Bonhoeffer was against Nazism, he still held aspects of a worldview that was common in Germany after World War I. For instance, in 1929, while giving a public lecture entitled "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," "Bonhoeffer defended war on the basis of a sacred obligation to the members of one's *Volk*" (16). Haynes and Hale explain that the word *Volk* means both people and a specific ethnicity (17).

Section two focuses on what the authors believe are the five key theological concepts developed by Bonhoeffer: *Christ existing as community, costly grace, vicarious representative action, ethics and formation, and religionless Christianity*. Each theological concept is presented in a descriptive yet useable way and makes up one chapter. However, each one is inherently connected to the others, pointing to "the continuity . . . of his thought" (77). Staying true to the title of the series, Haynes and Hale offer readers the opportunity to learn about Bonhoeffer's theology without recourse to other reference texts.

The third and final section, entitled *Legacy*, is a discussion of Bonhoeffer's lasting impact on both theology and the church. Though his works have been used by many different groups and scholars, within and outside the church, Haynes and Hale offer the reader seven questions which focus on the intersection of his work and his life. These seven questions admirably highlight the fact that *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians* is a suitable introduction to the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

*Adam Hall, Tofield, Alberta  
beaverpastoral@telus.net*

# *Touchstone*

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## **Editorial Inquiries**

*Touchstone*  
c/o Emmanuel College  
75 Queen's Park Crescent E  
Toronto ON M5S 1K7  
Phone: (416) 546-9088  
Email: peter.wyatt@utoronto.ca

## **Subscriptions**

*Touchstone*  
4094 Tomken Rd.  
Mississauga, ON L4W 1J5  
Phone: (905) 273-9505  
Email: revjohn.hogman@bellnet.ca

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The purpose of *Touchstone* is to bring The United Church of Canada's heritage of theology and faith to bear on its present life and witness, and to engage the issues of our day in the light of the biblical message and the Christian tradition.

## Contributors

**Betsy Anderson** is director of continuing education at Emmanuel College and holder of a McGeachy scholarship. *betsy.anderson@utoronto.ca*

**Rob Fennell** is associate professor of historical and systematic theology at the Atlantic School of Theology. *rfennell@astheology.ns.ca*

**Ed Searcy** is minister of University Hill United Church in Vancouver and editor of the collection, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*. *edsearcy@shaw.ca*

**Don Schweitzer** is professor of theology at St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon, and editor of the recently published *The United Church of Canada: A History*. *don.schweitzer@usask.ca*

**Marguerite van Die** is professor emerita of history and religion at Queen's University.

**Harold Wells** is professor emeritus of theology at Emmanuel College. *harold.wells@utoronto.ca*

**Peter Wyatt**, a past principal of Emmanuel College, will serve as academic dean of the Global Institute of Theology being held, June 2012, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, by the World Communion of Reformed Churches. *peter.wyatt@utoronto.ca*

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