



Exploring implications for how we live

The first stage of many people's encounter with progressive Christianity has been about rethinking how we understand the origins of Christianity – particularly how to interpret the Biblical documents and the theological statements of the first four centuries as written for their times in the ideas and language of those times. The questions, "What did they mean then?" and "What do they mean for us now?" have opened fresh and transformative understandings of Christianity.

While these questions will remain important, many people around the world involved with progressive Christianity are now focussed on a question that necessarily follows: "What are the implications of these new understandings of Christianity (and of religion and spirituality) for how we live?"

The PCNV meeting on 15 May was about the hottest topic in today's media - climate change. The next meeting on 19 June turns to personal religion – the practice of the mystical path. See below and on the last page for details.

MYSTICAL PRACTICE

When John Dominic Crossan was in Australia last year he expressed his opinion that mysticism would have a greater part in Christianity of the future. Peter Kennedy expressed a similar view at another PCNV meeting.

Most of those who participate in worship or other community religious experiences do so as part of a community with a familiar pattern of activity. We tend to take our community's understandings and actions as normative and have limited opportunities to experience other practices.

At a time when there are great changes within religious groups and between religious groups, how can we actually experience and reflect on new possibilities?

The PCNV Committee has invited two people who practice the mystical path to introduce us to some of those practices at the PCNV meeting on 19 June. The two presenters come from very different traditions within Christianity - a Uniting Church minister and a Quaker with experience in the Society of Friends in England and as an Australian Quaker.

The afternoon will be experiential and involve opportunities to participate in practices, to reflect on them, and to ask questions.

NEWS FLASH ERIC ELNES VISIT CANCELLED

Due to circumstances beyond PCNV's control, the visit to Australia by Eric Elnes has been cancelled.

The PCNV learning festival "What progressive faith communities can look like in practice" with Eric Elnes, planned for Saturday 23 July, has therefore been cancelled.

People who had booked places for this event have been refunded their payments. The promotional leaflet has been removed from the PCNV website.

The PCNV Committee will consider implications for PCNV activities for July and will keep members informed.

Books of interest to progressive Christians

Eight weeks of recuperation after a spinal operation that restricted sitting, and therefore time at the computer, provided unexpected time to read. Following are some brief introductory notes on titles that could be of interest to progressive Christians. More detailed reviews of some books will be included in later newsletters. *David Merritt*

Gregory C Jenks, *The Once and Future Bible. An Introduction to the Bible for Religious Progressives.* WIPF & STOCK, Oregon. 2011. Paperback, 146 pages.

Dr Jenks is a leading Australian theological scholar, Dean of St Francis Theological College in Brisbane, and a fellow of the Jesus Seminar. His new book on the Bible combines cutting edge scholarship with awareness of the situation of critical readers in the 21st century. As the subtitle indicates, this guide to the Bible is not written for Christian traditionalists or conservatives but for people who feel the relevance of contemporary questions about life and religion.

“Perhaps more than any other category of reader, the religious progressive reads the Bible with one eye on the questions that arise from her own experience of life. This kind of reader is seeking practical wisdom for life in the here and now, not reassurance about life in the hereafter. This may require reading against the grain of the biblical text and posing questions never in the mind of the ancient authors. Rather than immersing herself in the literary world of the Bible, the progressive reader will demand that the Bible speak to her world”. (Page 202)

Dr Jenks deals frankly with the parts of the biblical text that present unacceptable ethical and theological views but also shows how the ancient wisdom of other parts of the texts can illuminate living in our world.

The three main sections of the book provide a clear guide: “People of the Book”, “Jewish Texts in the Bible”, “Christian texts in the Bible”. The appendices giving key relevant dates (Pages 209 – 210) and a Glossary of terms (Pages 211 – 221) are particularly useful resources.

This is a helpful and stimulating book for people wanting to understand the biblical texts in their original setting and for their relevance for today.

Lorraine Parkinson, *The World According to Jesus ... his blueprint for the best possible world.* Spectrum Publications, Richmond, Victoria. 2011. Paperback, 252 pages.

This book will be launched at the June 19 meeting of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria and a fuller review will be included in the next Newsletter. The purpose of the author can be stated simply but has profound implications. Dr Parkinson wants to present a foundation for a renewed church that is compelled by scholarship to look beyond traditional Christian dogmas. The foundation proposed is the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

The book deals with a central theme: “The teachings of Jesus are not simply a loose collection of sayings about being a good neighbour, or a peacemaker, or overcoming prejudice, or being forgiving, or being humble, or refusing to be violent, or taking time out to pray, or treating people as equals. Those teachings and many more are integral parts of a whole – a tightly argued, consistent whole. They are essential elements of what came to be Jesus’ holistic vision of what he called the Kingdom of heaven on earth. They are the necessary qualities of an enlightened humanity and therefore of the best possible world.” (Page 4)

In 32 brief, easy to read chapters, Dr Parkinson ‘unpacks’ the original language and meaning of each of Jesus’ teachings and discusses their implications for people today. There is much that could be said in a longer review. But for now this is a book that followers of Jesus in the complex world of today will not want to miss.

Nigel Leaves, *Religion Under Attack. Getting Theology Right.* Polebridge Press, Oregon. 2011. Paperback, 240 pages.

Noting that religion is back in public media attention, Australian scholar Nigel Leaves deplores the oversimplification, poor information, and confrontational nature of much that is happening in relation to both

the Christian and Muslim religions. “Many devote their entire lives ‘to the interests of an idea that has lodged in their brains’ whether this be Democracy, Allah, Jesus or Evolution. (Quoting Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*) What is more, all parties are intent on winning the hearts and minds of ordinary people. A war of ideas is being fought in conference venues, television debates, newspaper articles, best-selling books, and on the internet. Samuel Huntington’s famous prediction of a clash of civilizations has come true; we are now witnessing a clash of *intellectual* civilizations. The worlds of science and religion are on a collision course, with each intent on eliminating the other because one asserts that ‘God is a delusion’ while the other condemns ‘scientific naturalism’ as evil. The forces of naturalism/scientific materialism are pitched against those who argue that matter and body are not the totality of existence. Notable scientists either openly disavow any credence in supernatural beings or assert their belief in a ‘Something More’ by affirming ‘the God hypothesis’. And a similar division separates religious scholars; some theologians cast doubt on the validity of Darwin’s theory of evolution, while others assert that the Universe is unsupported and ‘outsideless’.” (Pages 11 – 12)

Leaves argues that what this situation requires is a more appropriate theological response than is often assumed. He discusses progressive Christian perspectives sympathetically throughout the book but presents a strong challenge to become more actively involved in public presentation of alternatives to dogmatism and conservatism. “The well-attested ‘information’ explosion of recent years means that people are free to investigate and debate the merits or drawbacks of religious beliefs and practices, and this demands a more carefully orchestrated response by liberal Christians to those who make outrageous statements about (or even on behalf of!) God. Preposterous ideas concerning or offered in the name of the Almighty must be greeted with a loud chorus: **‘That’s not my God’.**” (Pages 227 – 228)

Of all the books I read during this 8 weeks, this is the one that presented me with most food for thought and is the one I want to read again more carefully.

Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth. The Evidence for Evolution.* Black Swan, London. 2009. Paperback 470 pages.

Dawkins is notorious among Christians for his shallow attacks on religion by stereotyping the extremes of fundamentalist religion. This should not blind us to his superb scholarship and brilliant writing as a biologist. It was one of his earlier books, ***Climbing Mount Improbable*** (Viking 1996. 308 pages) that helped me to understand evolution. It still has a prominent place on my bookshelves.

In this new book, Dawkins explicitly sets out the evidence for evolution. He is consciously rebutting the denigrating claim that evolution is ‘only a theory’. It is a highly readable book, rich with scientific information and insight, and includes some spectacular full colour visuals. The implications for our understanding of life generally and of human life in particular are far-reaching. An evolutionary understanding of the development of life is a prerequisite for contemporary social and religious theory.

While Dawkins cannot resist drawing conclusions (usually appropriate) about some religious views, for the most part he concentrates on scientific evidence that should be acknowledged. “We know a great deal more about how evolution has worked ever since it got started, much more than Darwin knew. But we know little more than Darwin did about how it got started in the first place. This is a book about evidence, and we have no evidence bearing upon the momentous event that was the start of evolution on this planet.” (Page 416). If you read the book, you will see that he does not consider that an opening for creationists. This is a superb book. It is indeed about ‘the greatest show on earth’ of which we are an integral part.

Richard North Patterson, *Exile.* Published in 2007.

A complete change of pace: this is a thriller from one of my top two novelists who provide insight into the human condition (the other is Morris West). Beautifully written, the story brings to life the complex histories and present day social, political and religious realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The action moves rapidly between USA, Palestine and Israel. This was my second reading of the novel and I was even more involved and impressed than the first time. The vivid realism of the plots in his novels is influenced by Patterson’s experience as a trial lawyer and on the boards of several Washington-based advocacy groups dealing with gun violence, political reform, and reproductive rights.

For space reasons, I will hold over two impressive books by Australian Anglican bishop and prolific author Tom Frame for review in a future newsletter.

Tom Frame, *Losing My religion. Unbelief in Australia.* UNSW Press, Sydney. 2009. Paperback 336 pages.

Tom Frame, *Evolution in the Antipodes. Charles Darwin and Australia.* NSW Press, Sydney. 2009. Paperback, 307 pages.

Sources for books

Following the recent closure of more bookshops, it has not always been easy to know where to purchase books dealing with progressive Christian perspectives. There has been an enthusiastic response to the decision by PCNV to stock and sell selected titles at PCNV meetings. This will continue. However, for people unable to attend those meetings or living in other states or in country areas, other sources could be useful.

Most of the books reviewed above were obtained from one of two sources:

Mosaic Resources, in Preston, a suburb of Melbourne, provides an excellent retail service by phone, email or website:
Phone: (03) 9470 6650
Email: contact@mosaicresources.com.au
Website: <http://mosaicresources.com.au>

On the internet, the **Fishpond** website features a wide range of religious books at low prices and makes no charge for postal delivery in Australia:
<http://www.fishpond.com.au>

Book reviews

We know from member feedback that reviews of resources are appreciated by at least some members. The newsletter editor welcomes book reviews in Word.doc format sent to:
info@pcnvictoria.org.au

"The World According to Jesus"

The new book by Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson, *The World According to Jesus ... his blueprint for the best possible world*, will be launched at the PCNV meeting on Sunday 19 June by Dr Jill Tabart, an ex-President of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Lorraine Parkinson is well known to PCNV audiences. She is an Australian biblical scholar, a leader in Jewish-Christian relations, a speaker at a number of PCNV meetings and a member of the PCNV Committee.

Copies of the book will be available for purchase at the PCNV meeting. RRP is \$29.95

PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM

THE PCNV meeting on Sunday 28 August will provide insights into Progressive Judaism and stimulate fresh thinking by Progressive Christians. Guest speakers will be two outstanding rabbis with impressive reputations as stimulating speakers. Rabbi Fred Morgan and Rabbi Jonathon Keren-Black will speak on "What can Progressive Christians learn from Progressive Judaism?" The venue is Glen Iris Uniting Church.

"Ancient Gnosticism: 'Heretical' Christianity?"

This public lecture will be presented to the Melbourne Sea of Faith Network by David Miller (Existentialist Society - <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~exist>), at 7.30pm Thursday 16th June 2011 at the Carlton Library Meeting Room, corner Rathdowne and Newry Streets, Carlton. All are welcome. Gold coin donation appreciated.

David Miller comments: "There were numerous varieties of Christianity within the Early Church. The Roman Emperors selected one of the varieties and, to put it crudely, bought it out and backed it with the might of the Empire. The other varieties were denigrated as 'heretics' and suppressed. A number of those varieties had been labelled by the Church Fathers as 'Gnostic Christians'".

SoFiA Network Website:
www.sof-in-australia.org

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

• *“The Practice of the Mystical Path”*

with

Greg Crowe and Bev Polzin

WHEN: Sunday 19 June 2011
3.00pm to 5.00pm

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

THE TOPIC

"The Christian of the future will be a Mystic or he (she) will cease to exist at all" - Karl Rahner

In the past Mysticism was viewed as being the spirituality for celibates in monasteries. Today it is for people who live and work in everyday life. Mysticism today is for any who search for and desire an authentic transformed life not only for the self, but for all. The mystical path is a profoundly human journey. It is the movement from an unconscious seeking to a conscious desire.

What is Mysticism?

What might be the Mystical Path?

What might it mean to Practice the Mystical Path?

What might it mean for the future of Christianity?

THE PRESENTERS

The presenters will provide a balance of word and silence to engage and integrate the Mind and the Spirit, an afternoon of information and reflection.

Greg Crowe was Ordained as a Uniting Church Minister in 1992 and has worked in both congregational ministry and chaplaincy within the Juvenile Justice custody centers of Victoria. Greg says of himself that he is no expert on Christian Spirituality or Mysticism. He is simply a seeker, open to the transforming of the sacred presence in and for the world. Greg is currently Minister at Ewing Memorial Uniting Church, Malvern East.

Bev Polzin started attending Quaker Meetings for Worship in Redruth, Cornwall, England, in about 1970, and finally joined the Religious Society of Friends in Cornwall, in 1981. Since returning to Australia in 1983, she has served Australian Quakers as Yearly Meeting Secretary from 1998 to 2004. She has also served Victorian Quakers in a number of positions, including as Regional Meeting Clerk.

Cost is \$5 for members and \$7 for non-members