

Intellectual integrity:

The search for 'intellectual integrity' within the Christian faith has taken a much higher profile in the last generation. Whilst one would imagine this would be attractive to the under forties somewhat surprisingly, in Australia at least, it has attracted members of the older generation. Intellectual integrity has been a driving force behind the development of the Progressive Christian movement particularly among the older generation who now recognise the importance of "spin" in thinking straight.

More importantly many people are trying to make sense of their spiritual life by using the rational techniques they apply to other aspects of living. People concerned about the spiritual dimension of their lives are more likely to ask the question, "Is what I am being told consistent with what I believe is possible? Or, "Does my knowledge of the world and how things work, fit with the orthodox Christian view of religion? Fortunately today we are raising our children to be more questioning of any assertion or 'established fact' regardless of whether it is religious or not.

Many devout Christians have wrestled with fundamental questions concerning their faith such as, "Was Jesus divine? "Could a loving God sacrifice his own son?" "Is Jesus the 'only' Son of God?" "Can the gospels be truly the word of God when there is such disagreement on matters of fact?" "What other writings of this time confirm the gospel narratives?"

If you have raised these questions in your mind be comforted by the fact that you are not alone; further there are writers and scholars who have walked this path and their writings are able to assist our journey. Many are not household names; apart from Bishop Spong most Christians would not be familiar with the work of Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, or Robert Miller let alone the newer generation of scholars such as Hal Tausig, Bernard Brandon Scott or Joe Bessler-Northcut.

The influence of Bishop Spong has been quite significant particularly in his writings and public speaking. I have been greatly influenced by Spongs books such as, "Why Christianity must change or die" and "A new Christianity for a new world." Spong addresses a wide range of topics and is not afraid to be controversial as he tackles such issues as sexual ethics, the identity and meaning of Jesus, the future of worship and the relevance of theism in today's world. Spong is easy to read and you do not need a background in theology to be able to follow his clearly articulated reasoning. He stresses the importance of intellectual integrity by stating that the church must restate what it believes in the light of new scholarship and research.

Perhaps the greatest influence for me in the late 90's was to read Marcus Borg's "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" in this book Borg places the importance of the gospels in context for me by referring to the synoptic gospels

of Matthew, Mark and Luke as reflecting the pre-Easter Jesus or more correctly the Jesus of history whereas the gospel of John stresses the post-Easter Jesus or the Jesus interpreted and explained by the early Christian movement. In his more recent book "The Heart of Christianity" Borg stresses the importance for the church to hold together two broad streams of Christian belief. Those who support a progressive Christian approach which he refers to as the "Emerging Church" and those who still find their spiritual fulfilment in the traditional church of our ancestors with its support for such matters as the doctrine of the atonement and the adherence to a personal interventionist God. He refers to this group as the "Earlier Church". Borg tends to cling more to the institutional church than do some other progressive Christian writers, but his passion or almost obsession with Jesus of Nazareth makes him one of the most exciting of the progressive Christian writers.

Another writer who has had a most profound effect on my understanding of Christianity is Dominic Crossan, a writer and communicator not as well known as the first two. Crossan is to my mind the most scholarly of the progressive writers and I enjoy immensely his analytical approach to an understanding of the scriptures. He has a great knowledge of the political, social, and everyday living aspects of the society of Jesus day and so he can put many of the gospels stories within a detailed context. As a result the accuracy or otherwise of the gospels stories can be analysed against this background knowledge. I also find Crossan easy to read but more demanding of my concentration than either Borg or Spong. In his book "Jesus a Revolutionary biography", Crossan explains a practice of Jesus known as "Open Commensality" or open table where all are welcome to participate in eating sharing and discussion regardless of gender or race. He emphasises a 'social egalitarian' approach to Jesus life style, which is further explained in the sending out of the disciples on their missionary journeys. For Crossan hospitality and healing are key themes of Jesus ministry. Crossan portrays Jesus as person with great warmth and passion a Jewish peasant sage with an understanding that the Spirit of God is alive and at work in the world.

In 2005 whilst in California I visited the Presbyterian church in Sausalito just north of San Francisco and met with the pastor Rev Jim Burklo I had just read his book "Open Christianity: Home by Another Road" which looked at the practical application of Progressive Christianity. I was fascinated by the service format and approach, people wore casual clothes, the readings were sometimes from the Bible or they could be contemporary poetry or readings from other religious traditions. Prayer was in the form of meditation and was celebrated by the striking of a Buddhist bell. The order of service omitted a number of traditional Christian elements and the communion table was adorned with a flower arrangement and no Christian symbol. Perhaps the most important point for me was the amount of time used in the beginning of the service for pastoral concerns and the building up of the faith. About thirty minutes was taken up by members of the congregation dealing with these matters before Jim gave his address, firstly to the children and then to the

adults in the congregation. This congregation under Jim Burklo's guidance had developed a liturgy the suited their needs and their stage of the spiritual journey, a liturgy which was rich and meaningful.

As we journey with progressive Christianity there are questions that arise such as, "Is our liturgy a true reflection of our theology and belief and if not why not? Perhaps the most pressing question of all, " Does my life reflect the person of Jesus as revealed in scripture or am I following a Jesus designed by my tradition?

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