

Common Dreams 2

“Living the Progressive Religion Dream” April 2010

Dr Francis Macnab 17th April 2010

I am grateful indeed for the scholars behind us, around us, and ahead of us, taking us into the future. My gratitude is particularly focussed on these scholars who have brought new insight, intelligence, integrity and inspiration to the study of bridge- building between the ancient scriptures and contemporary secular society.

In the context of these scholars of the Faith past and present, my task is to preach it, not as a once off visiting celebrity, but as a Sunday after Sunday hack to a congregation with specific characteristics.

It is a pulpit congregation first of all. There is no residential congregation. To be in my church requires people rising early, taking a train, or drive by car —and in all weathers find an inhospitable car-park and pay, then walk several blocks in all weathers. I am staggered that some people travel 16-20kms and others regularly travel 100 kms in, and 100 kms out — passing literally hundreds of churches along the way.

They come for 1½ hours in church and another 1 ½ hours in a range of programs afterwards.

During the church service they sing four hymns, the words of which in many, are theological gobbledegook, until they protest that they would like to leave much of this behind. One person, a retired vice-chancellor, said he is fully refreshed by being in St Michael's but when it comes to singing—

“Glorious things of these are spoken” - he stands to do so but is totally traumatised when asked to sing;

"Blest inhabitants of Zion
Washed in the Redeemers blood."

The people of this ever changing, highly searching congregation want new insights, intelligence, integrity, and inspiration: and if the preacher misses the mark, they won't be back!

Each year we receive 30-50 new members. They come for a variety of reasons, and then some become the real dynamic of the place and others travel onwards.

In recent times, I have advocated the need for a New Faith. Although I have been doing so for 40 years, I started to use the words more pungently - A New Faith. Not many outside St Michael's took notice until we shot an arrow right into the guts of what might be called The Old Faith.

All of a sudden, I became the target of appalling behaviour from people on the top perches of the church to the wide numbers of people that the church had failed to educate. Regardless of top perch position or simply one of the chooks in the yard, the hostility had a common theme, "We don't want any 'New Faith' stuff here," it may unsettle all the chooks. When visited by the appointed interrogators, I was repeatedly told that the object was to return the church to its settled state.

I was told that I would upset people of other faiths—despite the demonstrable fact that my church had done more for the interfaith transcultural conversations than any other church in the Synod.

We put up a huge sign on a major Melbourne freeway. It said "The Ten Commandments: the most negative document ever written." That sign provoked drivers to stop and stare. Some turned around and drove back under it again to read it. People protested, even though they could only name one of the commandments, and most did not know where to find them.

In the high buzz of those confrontational days, we discovered we were people of the 21st century as we received 52,000 hits to our website on one day and 40,000 the next.

At length some said how is 'Honour your father and mother', negative? They had not read the whole commandment nor the ensuing chapters where it states clearly that a child who failed this commandment could be put to death. That's fairly negative!

Some said I was playing a gimmick. But it was no gimmick. It was saying the Old Faith no longer works!

"Thou shalt not kill" did not stop Moses (if he was an historic figure) from killing thousands in the name of his God, just as rulers across nations in the 20th century wiped out something like 160 million of fellow human beings and some said they were "defending the faith". Look squarely at The Old Faith and you see;

- a vast defection from the churches;
- a wide awareness of an untenable discrimination against women and people of difference, race, culture and sexual preference and practice.

The Old Faith seemed to be content with the old cosmology, the old image of God, the idea of prayers to God who was not as keen on rescue operations or patriarchal omnipotent interventions as we would have liked.

My New Faith began in the 1950's with solid 'immersion' in Paul Tillich, and an equally comprehensive exposure to Martin Buber and to the existentialists in philosophy, theology and psychiatry.

I add the latter because my involvement in psychology and psychoanalysis marked me as an early traitor. I was determined to open an intelligent and pragmatic conversation between the two disciplines of the mind and the soul, of

personality, human behaviour and culture. But the resistance and the hostility have swayed between ignorance and fear, threats and rage.

Early in the 1970's I invited a very distinguished preacher to visit. As his visit progressed, I somewhat audaciously said he was using too much 'God-talk'. I think he was shocked and retorted, 'I am a God preacher.' Ten years later, I read in one of the preacher's magazines how he was instructing young preachers to have less 'God-talk' and listen more to the 'people-talk'. Paul Tillich's inductive listening advocacy was overtaking the Old Faith's deduction and imposition, or as Martin Buber said, the process was an unfolding one as we edge towards our fullest authenticity.

In the same period, I became increasingly aware that reading the Scriptures in church was something I did, but no one understood. I have stoically stuck to the practice of reading Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel. I was especially determined to include the Old Testament each Sunday because many fellow clergy had long since abandoned it, as they had no study of Hebrew and associated languages. Realising that few understood a word of what I was saying, less still 'the word', I decided to interpret the Scriptures in terms of themes; and so began what came to be known as my thematic theology. A systematic thematic theology.

Then one Sunday, completely without warning, Dr Bob Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, was sitting in the front pew. I had merely read bits and pieces of his writings. I was startled to find him in church. We at once struck up a most valuable association. We had come to a somewhat common position—he from the position of a history New Testament scholar, and I from the position of a thematic practitioner integrating the themes of scripture and faith with a practical intelligible (and I hope scholarly) psychology and psychoanalysis.

I began recasting large sections of the Scriptures into understandable and acceptable English.

This was also accelerated by a visit to my 99 year-old aunt in hospital for her final days; I found her reading the Bible. When I asked where she was reading, she said—"The Psalms, I love the Psalms. I can't make much sense of them but here and there, they say some beautiful things." "Yes exactly!" But here and there they say some dreadful things: God advising that the enemies should be wiped out, the children orphaned, or their heads smashed against the stones.

I decided it was time to stop vacillating. I began revising the Psalms, and in my book "A Fine Wind is Blowing", there are 75 Psalms that can be read for their beauty, inspiration and enjoyment, without the violence and the 'God-talk' as if he endorsed the violence and torture. We might also turn to some of the New Testament writings. Some of the stories attributed to Jesus are ethically unsupportable. Other stories are obvious fiction since there was no scribe to record word for word what happened to Jesus in the Wilderness Temptations, what Pilate said to Jesus, what Jesus did/did not say to Mary in the garden. In any case these accounts were written decades after they were supposed to have occurred. In my book "This Hungry Time" I have re-written some of the New Testament words. Who, in this 21st century, can understand what St Paul meant, and did he really consider that centuries after he shot off a letter to some recalcitrants, later would-be biblical scholars would publish volumes by the ton, on what he meant by one particular word or phrase.

If you accept the Scriptures as written by God, or maybe exalted by God, then you start from that platform, but if you recognise that these are not the words of God on a throne in the heavens, then you start to see the whole scene in a different light.

J.A.T Robinson was exiled in Cambridge, and though I had more to do with the competitive university on another train line, it was only in the years I spent at the University of Aberdeen that I had begun to hear more of this man who visited on more than one occasion.

Before he wrote "Honest to God", he published a full front page article in 'The Observer', titled, "Your Image of God Must Go" In recent time Robert Wright wrote his book, "The Evolution of God", but still the churches and all of us are struck with a primitive or is it a pediatric view of God. In the interests of an intelligent faith and religion, we need to grow up.

But then a very well-read intelligent man stopped me the other day, and said — "Well if God is no longer God, to whom do you pray?" In my writings, I have tried to answer that question. To do so, I have written three books of prayers, and starting from the traditional view of God, I have been evolving to a view of God as a 'Presence' (a view that Moses would accept) and as a 'God spirit' that Jesus of Nazareth proposed when (accepting John's Gospel) he might have said; "God is spirit and those who worship him must do so in spirit."

My interrogators and my abusers were set on declaring my fate. I asked them had they read anything I had written. No. Had they ever attended church at St Michael's? No. But they were ready to condemn, not least because they "knew" I had rejected Jesus as "the Son of God": so they said! I suggested they read my words where I repeatedly have written we cannot see the figure of Jesus clearly, but we can see clearly his finger and what he was pointing to. Bob Funk also wrote this exhortation. He said the disciples too frequently looked at Jesus instead of following his pointing finger. Oh yes! He pointed to a new humanity, a new being, where violence, destruction and waste were eliminated (the theme of Michael of the Bible). Or we can rephrase those words and say he pointed to societies where torture would be banned world-wide,

where abuse and cruelty would be eliminated in armies and police stations around the world, and where from America to Australia, from Bazra to Britain, from Afghanistan to Somalia, the people would embrace the ways of the good, the tender and the beautiful.

In the vigour of many protests, I will tell you of one; A person, (minister?) wrote from a provincial city a fairly audacious letter that he surely would not send to a criminal relative. He concluded that he and his congregation in the light of my New Faith had decided to recite the Apostles Creed every Sunday morning. I broke my normal silence. I wrote back saying I had no objections. I simply would be surprised if his congregation (of 15) grew in numbers as a result of his bold stance in reciting a creed that from the standpoint of 21st century theology and cosmology was unbelievable.

What is the New Faith I have advocated?

I drew attention to the chronic obsession with beliefs, creeds, dogma - with fear, punishment and exclusion never far away. Instead I invite people to get in tune with the themes of Jesus' engagement with people.

When people stood in front of him and said, "We are sick. We are damaged. We are disabled. We can't get into the pool?" —What did he say?

Did he hand out a 12-page statement of beliefs with boxes to tick? Indeed not! He said; "Your faith will heal you",

"Your faith opens the door to your restoration and health, growth, participation in life, wholeness."

Paul Tillich in the 1950's wrote:

Faith is an act of the total personality.

That is my self given mandate to involve psychology and psychoanalysis in

that act of the total personality.

Faith is not a belief system.

Faith is not the intellectual capacity to read Calvin's Institutes.

Faith is an act of the total personality.

I have set out in two major lectures and in a book to be published later this year, how that basic idea can be built into a faith and religion that works. I say if your religion does not work, it is time to change it.

I will not here take you into too many details. But when people come at me in their readiness to write me off as the 20-21st century crank, I point to three things. Two of them I shall pass over quickly, and I shall pause on the third.

The first is the astonishing events of St Michael's over these last nearly 40 years. While there are those who would dismiss these events, the facts of a radical faith community are there.

The second is the strong integration of faith with a highly professional and reputable psychotherapy institute. Again, there are those who would like to discredit its importance, but there it is—along with William James, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Rollo May, Erich Fromm, and numerous others who have joined this humanistic humanitarian personal interpersonal psychology.

I have written on a contextual psychotherapy. That context inevitably involves a person's faith and religion in its infantile form, in its fanaticism, or in its balanced approach to the world. In my books on Trauma Therapy, I shocked a few when I included chapters on "The Restoration of The Damaged Soul," and the phenomenology of that restoration through the seven losses incurred in major traumas—

1. Loss of innocence
2. Loss of connectedness

3. Loss of vital energy (is that faith energy?)
4. Loss of self-celebration and joy
5. Loss of the agency of transcendence
6. Loss of the agency of self-healing
7. Loss of a listening wisdom

The third issue I will pause on is how the New Faith can be better understood. In passing, I was very much affected by Robert Funk's invitation to me to present to the Seminar of the Jesus Scholars a description of the pathway I (we) had taken at St Michael's, and that presentation is published in the book "The Historical Jesus Goes To Church". At the conclusion of that presentation, the scholars conferred on me their Order of Merit, and I have brought it here to show you, as I imagine you have probably not seen the likes of it before.

In my first New Faith Lecture, I said;

"To see faith in terms of beliefs, biblical texts, creeds and custom is to miss the comprehensive richness that The New Faith offers, worked out through biblical and theological research, contemporary psychoanalytic practice, and a new understanding of health, and the part that faith, and the depths of the human spirit play in recovering and restoring health."

The New Faith has Five Platforms. Each platform has seven constituent components. The platforms are—

1. Basic Beliefs -7
2. Basic Themes -7
3. Dynamics of Faith -7
4. Essential Conversations -7

5. The Gifts of Faith -7

To illustrate the seven constituents, I shall take Platform Two: The Basic Themes.

You will recognise the seven constituents, and I hope endorse them.

- i. The enhancement of the human spirit.
- ii. The evolution of a better humanity.
- iii. A new consciousness of how the ethics of love, work, and play are changed in the 21st century.
- iv. The expulsion of negative and constrictive mentalisation.
- v. The focus on healing, health and wholeness.
- vi. The importance of our therapeutic and supportive communities
- vii. The experience of enjoyment and exuberance.

If I take Platform Three, The Energy of Dynamics of Faith, the seven constituents are;

- I. Inclusiveness vs. exclusion or expulsion.
- II. Inductive vs. deductive.
- III. Integration vs. fragmentation.
- IV. Interpersonal.
- V. Interconnectivity.
- VI. Intelligence.
- VII. Inspiration.

Each platform is thus analysed for the more comprehensive understanding of what Faith means.

The Five platforms have been exposed to five Searchers' groups called Ingots; and have taken some steps towards establishing a centre for the 'Development and Strengthening of the Human Spirit.' The Human Spirit can become a powerful creative spirit and a most vital strength in the human spirit. At time of suffering and crisis, many will speak of the strength of the human spirit without knowing what is meant by that. A new mythology can emerge unless we do the important exploration and analysis of what is meant by the strength of spirit. In many expressions of spirit, we search for ways to be in harmony with our inner spirits and in harmony with a higher spirit—hence we speak comprehensively of "The Good Spirit" of life. In this regard, you would see a strong similarity with Don Cupitt's way of aligning Spirit, Life and God.

We have gone further in providing the workings of a 'Centre for the Human Spirit' through:

- a. Conversations with distinguished scientists
- b. Consideration of how the New Faith is expressed in the Sunday blessing
- c. Explorations of the music of Mahler, Shostakovich, Chopin, Berlioz and Rachmaninov
- d. The experience of ageing—a group of 60-100 people between 60 and 95 years. This group has been meeting with me for 25 years, and I am pleased to say that Lloyd Geering will join me in this group next Friday.

The question I constantly ask is "Does your religion work?" Karen Armstrong would ask the same question. Back in 1999, she wrote;

"More and more people have found it no longer works for them, and when religious ideas cease to be effective they fade away."

Any one of us and all of us, and I in particular may wonder at times – 'why bother'? Too many people are content with their way of seeing things, even though it is out of touch with current research and available information.

In my world of psychoanalysis, I see people who are living in the midst of unreality, irrationality and inauthenticity and in the many expressions of mental disturbance and distress. It is our task to help them reconnect with themselves and with others, with the resources of health, with the pathways to their potential and to their enhancement of themselves and others. It is interesting to note some important parallels with religion. If a person is living an impoverished pointless existence it spreads to others. But if a person discovers the pathways to their enhancement, they invariably let that enhancement flow to others.

The New Faith knows that the repetitive confession of sins (impoverishment alienation) is infused with negativity - but The New Faith advocates the celebration of our discovered enhancement, and this opens up more and more the positive emotions that call for expression and celebration.

I have explained part of my story of the pathway to a New Faith, and I need not and will not dwell further on those who choose to resist that pathway. I have now been doing this for just on 50 years, and I am under no illusions about the next 50 years. But I persist in the tradition of Sisyphus whose eternal task was to roll his boulder to the top of the hill, thence it would roll back down to the bottom. He would then go to where it lay, and with gathered energy begin the task to roll that boulder once more to the top of the hill. So- in spite of resistance, attack and challenge, I persist. The task is urgently before us. The good is vital – a New Faith relevant for the 21st century.