

# The Challenge Progressive Thinking Is Making to the Church

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April 2010

Introductory remarks...

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... I believe, and strongly, that my instincts – whatever they may be grounded in – when it comes to the church, to Christianity, perhaps even, to religion as a whole, the instincts I have that press me to be aware of the passage of time, are right. For we have wasted much, much time and we must, for the sake, not of the church, of Christianity, or even of religion in general, but for the sake of the world and all life on this planet, stop. Stop wasting time on those things we've spent so much time talking about – doctrinal differences, ecclesial authority, the existence of god, the divinity of Jesus. *It's time*. It's time we acknowledge what it is we have come to know, and act upon the implications of that knowledge. It's time. And, if my clocks and my instincts are right, not only is it time, it may be that it is way past time.

We come to this moment in time, called by a very long list of voices, and it has been many, many years, decades, even centuries, that those voices have been calling us.

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Listen to this particular call:

"I suspect that we stand on the brink of a period in which it is going to become increasingly difficult to know what the true defence of Christian truth requires. There are always those ... who see the best, and indeed the

only, defence of doctrine to lie in the firm reiteration, in fresh and intelligent contemporary language, of "the faith once delivered to the saints." And the Church has not lacked in recent years theologians and apologists who have given themselves to this task. Their work has been rewarded by a hungry following, and there will always be need of more of them. Nothing that I go on to say should be taken to deny their indispensable vocation.

"At the same time, I believe we are being called, over the years ahead, to far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms. Indeed, if our defence of the Faith is limited to this, we shall find in all likelihood that we have lost out to all but a tiny religious remnant. A much more radical recasting, I would judge, is demanded, in the process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology - of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself - must go into the melting. Indeed, though we shall not of course be able to do it, I can at least understand what those mean who urge that we should do well to give up using the word "God" for a generation, so impregnated has it become with a way of thinking we may have to discard it if the Gospel is to signify anything."

These words were penned in 1962 as the preface for the small but enormously provocative book, *Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson. Robinson was the Bishop of Woolwich in South London when he wrote his book, provoked by the ideas of Paul Tillich. Robinson's words came as freshness upon a bleak and sterile ecclesial back-drop to the many who wished to see his challenge accepted by the church - those passionate about what the church might be and what it could do in a world filled with conflict and strife. He was vilified for his vision and his challenge to organized Christianity. Yet he ended the preface of his groundbreaking book with this

line: "The one thing of which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, [my words] will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough."

And, those heartened by Robinson, too, have called to us and continue to do so.

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Over forty years of scholarship and argument later, we cannot shrink from Robinson's vision. We, too, must look at it directly and rise to his challenge, recasting our understanding of Christianity, examining the structures that have supported it, clearing away those things that would keep us from seeing it clearly; for it's time to step more and more boldly into the realities of this world as we experience them, to open ourselves to an honest critique of our Christian heritage, and to expose ourselves to the light of new understandings that so many have placed before us. *It's time.*

We see all human beings as having a spiritual dimension to their lives – a part of us that, indistinct from any other part yet different in that it is the realm of meaning, values, and relationships – those things that are, so often, hard to define, explain, measure. Some might balk at the word “spiritual”, feeling that we are imposing a definition on them they have not chosen for themselves and so we must be cautious. But if I may, I would suggest that we have honoured this realm of reality and sought to define it by wrapping it up in dogma, rituals, symbols, and metaphors that seek to place it, clear and understood, in the centre of people’s lives. When we have done so, we have called it religion and whatever our particular iteration of it “right”. Religion seems to be mandated by our peculiar human need to make sense of our

world. And so we construct our institutions and traditions, for our time, and according to beliefs, as we understand them.

But *we* are here because we understand that it *does not* and *cannot* hold that one generation's idea of the appropriate approach to their particular understandings of these things – this realm of meaning, values, what we speak of as the spiritual – must hold for the next generation. Just as every other field of knowledge and wisdom has changed as we have learned, our faith communities have not only the freedom, but the supremely important responsibility to work at our message and our expression of it - to align and realign it with the best, the highest, the healthiest vision we can develop of the sacredness of life, the sacredness of community. We, too, must take up that task and work to create a world in which each person's right to find their own way is honoured, whether it involves ancient or contemporary rituals or traditions, religious or secular means, and we challenge ourselves to be open to new understandings as they are made known to us.

(A Progressive Perspective) What we must bring to the task is a progressive mindset that can help us think our way through to a new and meaningful place to be. But before we go in search of it, I want to explain what I mean when I use the term “progressive”. People are often disturbed by the use of that word, usually because it intimates that they are being judged as either regressive or at a standstill. Those most upset are they who already see themselves as progressive and me as simply having gone too far. I am not particularly sympathetic to either of these laments because I believe life demands that we find new ways to cope with, adapt to, engage with what we are presented with in the most positive way possible. If someone’s stretch is not where mine is, that does not mean it is not a stretch or that mine is not – it simply means that life has presented them with different

realities to address than it has presented me. I celebrate that we have each put one foot forward beyond the next, regardless of where that has taken us. There is no “place” inherent in the word “progressive” – we each need to find it for ourselves.

But “progressive” also has some nasty stuff hanging over it from the former demands we placed upon “progress”, expecting it to be the answer to all our problems. Ronald Wright, in his book “A Short History of Progress” helps us recognize that almost any progress taken to an extreme is just that – extreme and often, because of that, detrimental. We must be cautious when embracing progress and glean from the array of possibilities before us that which will bring forward from the past the best it has to offer and will mix it with the best that we might create – all working toward a world of beauty, truth, and goodness.

In the denomination I serve in Canada, we have a very unique situation created for us by our birth. When The United Church of Canada came together in 1925, its founding fathers, as they were, recognized that it was impossible, given the different understandings and creeds of the denominations coming into union, to develop a statement of faith that all could ascribe to. Immediately, the centrality of belief was set aside in a way it had not been before in any Christian denomination. In its place was positioned the right for a leader within the denomination to find his or her beliefs essentially consistent with the statement of faith presented at union. What that meant was that, as individuals found themselves slightly out of synch with the articulated beliefs of the church, the body overseeing their relationship to it could accept that their understanding was “essentially” in agreement. So movement was possible and the introduction of

contemporary scholarship into denominational schools of theology in the 50s and 60s was totally acceptable and considered appropriate.

Concurrently, as doctrinal alignment became less and less crucial, the rise of institutionally sanctioned social values grew and, freed of the need to ground arguments in doctrinal positions, the United Church was able to lead in areas of social, sexual, and ecological justice. – We ordained the first woman in 1936, the first married woman and divorced clergy in the 1960s, spoke out on issues related to the right to choice in reproductive issues in early 1980s, work which led to the struggle for the rights of the lgbtq community throughout that same decade, and we have been outspoken on global climate change and the implications of lifestyle choices on it for the past twenty years. I am convinced that we were able to do all these things, take all these progressive steps, because we freed ourselves from dogmatic rigidity in relations to that first statement of faith accepted in 1925.

We also set the course for ourselves as a progressive voice in Christianity. For some of us, progressive is going to mean something very different than it means to those who are not working within a similarly open denomination. For others, it might mean the same thing. Essential agreement works both ways and those who have held to very fundamental beliefs would find their next step taking them to a very different place than mine will take me. But the step is the same and it is rooted in the willingness to embrace a progressive perspective. //

Progressive perspectives have been embraced in almost every discipline since we first discovered how to create fire and how to put a log underneath something to roll it up a hill – both wonderful examples of progressive thinking.

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fictitious dialogue (Jeeves and 14<sup>th</sup> C French Bishop)

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It is interesting and deeply significant that we recognize how little progressive thinking has been “allowed” let alone promoted in the church or how little it has affected what we do. Beliefs in every other discipline have taken us far beyond what was known or understood then. Almost anything the 14<sup>th</sup> Century bishop might have told us would, heard by a contemporary Grade 4 student, be laughed at. (15:30) But progressive thinking in the area of Christianity has been perfunctorily dismissed. The Bishop’s truths remain widely held contemporary truths. We can no longer ban what we have come to know through progressive scholarship from influencing the church. It is time. So, we bring our progressive perspective to the church.

But, what does that entail and how do we do it?

(~~applied to anything~~) A progressive perspective can be and regularly is applied to anything -- from education to nursing and health, to scientific research, to architecture, to gardening, to fashion. But wherever it is found, it has common elements that make it possible and common elements that make it useful. //

- (~~open~~) A progressive perspective is open. If you wish to bring a progressive perspective to something you have to be open to new ideas, challenges, differences. Perhaps the most difficult part of being open is the need to lower our estimation of our currently held beliefs enough that we are receptive to others, to be non-arrogant about what we know so that we can hear what others are bringing to the table. An open perspective is encouraging and non-defensive; it is able to suspend judgment and to hold ideas tentatively as they are assessed. It will be comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, not needing to have all the answers all at once.

Whatever your preconceived ideas are, you must become open to critique, to allow them to be added to by something else. As long as you are a teacher who believes that writing lines on the board is the only effective method of discipline, you're not opening yourself to new perspectives; you might pride yourself in your traditions, in your grounding in time-tested techniques, etc., but you are not progressive. //

- ~~(passionate & creative)~~ A progressive perspective is passionate and creative. No new thought arises in any mind in any discipline if it's owner is not passionate about what they are doing or is unable to think outside of the box. Think about it. What pushes the teacher to look for a new way to reach kids or the doctor to explore new transplant techniques? Passion. What helps them find it? Creativity – the ability to think beyond the normal, to put things together that don't belong together and watch what happens, to go beyond the ordinary.//

- ~~(intellectually rigorous)~~ A progressive perspective is intellectually rigorous. New scholarship is available in every discipline by the minute. Physicians can hardly keep up with the latest developments in cancer prevention and treatment—but they have to try. Seeking out variety of scholarship from many viewpoints is essential to a progressive perspective. We want our physicians to be committed to deep, life-long study so that they will always have the best ability to diagnose our ailments or to treat them as they become understood. And these days, we want our physicians to be able to look beyond their drug-centred training to alternate fields of health and wellbeing. We want them to be able to be vigilant about their own prejudices so that they can bring us the best. We want our physicians to be progressive thinkers. //



That's it. That's all you need to get yourself into a progressive mindset. Be open, passionate, creative, and intellectually rigorous. What you do then determines whether or not you'll make a difference with what you know and here is where I believe we have much work to do.

While contemporary scholarship has been accessible and welcome in liberal theological colleges for sixty years, we now find ourselves in a bit of bind as those who sit in front of us on Sunday mornings become and more and more educated in regard to the scholarship and issues we have been exposed to over those years. The great chasm between the pulpit and the pew is disappearing thanks to books written for the general public by authors such as John Shelby Spong, Karen Armstrong, Elaine Pagels, Marcus Borg, and Jack Miles. Additionally, and more recently, books academics might scoff at, such as *Constantine's Sword*, and novels like *The DaVinci Code*, and *Resurrection*, novels that have grown out of the imagination of a more informed public willing to mix fact with fiction, spill awareness of contemporary knowledge about the church and the Bible further into the streets. And the internet and search engines like Ms. Dewey and Jeeves are going to, it is true, cough up much, much more than the doctrinal tenets of the faith on sites that share the texts of Nag Hammadi, the atheists' bible, and posters artfully exhibiting the contradictory texts one might find in the book believed by so many to be the authoritative word of god for all time. We are no longer the most informed people in the room and those who had previously believed that everything said from the pulpit was factually true, have, for the last many years, been demanding answers to questions we could easily avoid in the past. Those outside the church, who had all found it too crazy to believe in the first place, have felt hugely vindicated by what they see as us being caught with our pants down or, perhaps more

accurately, that , all this time, we have had no clothes on at all and masked that with the bright colours of our vestments and the gilded beauty of our edifices. //

You'll recall that chasm that once existed between the pulpit and the pew – one we, the clergy, relied upon as we spun our theological mysteries and held the hands of the dying. As that chasm is erased, as more and more people in our pews become familiar with contemporary Christian scholarship and it is no longer the exclusive realm of the clergy, we have a choice to make. Will we eradicate the chasm altogether, or will we merely shift it to the periphery of the church, to beyond the outer walls of our sanctuaries? The latter keeps us comfortable, strokes our time-proven scriptures, hymnody, rituals, and the beauty of our language and the images it describes. But it keeps in place and, indeed, deepens the gulf between those in the church and those who have no idea what we are talking about or why it makes a difference. If we speak exclusively in metaphorical terms and surround ourselves with iconic symbols, none of which mean anything to those who have not been indoctrinated into Christianity or have not been provided a weekly glossary of terms, we will only isolate ourselves further. Our Christian worship services will become even more like the weekly gatherings of a member's only society, complete with peculiar customs, secret handshakes, and oddly archaic dress. A chasm outside our doors becomes a moat and very few will have the time, energy, or inclination to find their way past it. If we believe we have nothing to offer the world outside our doors, that is a fine choice and we can comfort ourselves into oblivion without hurting anyone, but if we believe we are part of making the world whole and raising to awareness the inherent dignity in all life, then speaking in terms the world will understand is our only way forward.

So we need four more aspects of progressive thinking – those that make it useful. They are essential to making any progressive thought we have influential in the world around us. These four elements aren't crucial to your becoming the most progressive thinker in the world, but they are crucial if you care at all about making the slightest whit of difference to anyone but yourself with what you come to know and understand.

- ~~(honest)~~ A progressive perspective is honest. Given the information that is available to us, given the best of what we know, the best of contemporary scholarship blended with our shared experience (as opposed to personal revelation), we acknowledge that which we believe to be true and then choose to incorporate it into our choices and our behaviour. We don't know that something is true and then act like we never heard it. We don't recognize that the Bible is not the authoritative word of God for all time and then process it into our sanctuaries, place it on gilded stands, and privilege it as the only document worth reading in our sacred gatherings. We don't honour the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings and then deny access to leadership roles to over fifty percent of the population because of their gender or up to another 10 percent because of their sexuality. We don't acknowledge that what we have called fundamental in our doctrine is no more "true" than that named as fundamental in the doctrines of others and then continue to lace our liturgies with language exalting Jesus as the Divine Son of God or the Christ or sing about him taking away the sins of the world or bringing it the only light it will ever need. On a recent radio segment, the individual in the chair opposite me said that Jesus had ended all famine. When I interrupted and challenged that perspective arguing that it was incredible to hold such a view when even in the United States of America, the number of children who go to bed hungry

is on a precipitous rise, he stated that “of course, he meant it allegorically”. When we are being honest, if we are using allegory, we say that we using allegory; if we are creating or using a metaphor, unless it is scaldingly obvious, we identify the metaphor and own the fact that we do not believe what we are saying in a literally true manner. If we want our progressive understandings to make any difference in the world, we speak honestly about them.

- (~~courageous~~) A progressive perspective is courageous. In any discipline, progressive thinking is thinking outside the box and comes with a number of obvious detractors. There will be those who become vitriolic as their previous understandings are challenged. There will be those who are marginalized by new thinking. There will be those who believe we are dismantling two thousand years of God’s work and who will see us as advocates of the adversary and seek to destroy us or the work that we do. We must be courageous in the face of their anger. But progressive change comes about not only because those promoting it are courageous in articulating the truth as they understand it, but also in deciding where and when compromise is warranted; not only in confronting tradition but in receiving and *inviting* critique, in sustaining criticism and rejection. //

- (~~respectful~~) In this sense, a progressive perspective utilizes another trait in order to become accepted. It is respectful. It is hard for us to listen to someone’s new ideas and discoveries if they are not courteous, humble, loving, or inviting. To think progressively one must hold an unconditional positive regard for all including those who do not hold a progressive perspective—one might have much to learn from them. A progressive thinker must hold the quest for truth more passionately than their ideas about it so they can be non-aggressive, holding back from forcing their

ideas on others, non-coercive when speaking about them and non-derisive when hearing from others. It is far too easy to draw lines in the sand and laugh at anyone not on your side of the line but if you're trying to influence everyone, that line and your laughter will undermine your efforts every time.//

- (~~balanced~~) And finally, a progressive perspective must be balanced. There will be those whose understandings of things spiritual can only be exercised with language that draws them to a well-worn and well-loved place of comfort in their hearts and as we seek to shift understandings to new places, their sense of loss and betrayal will be great. We must offer our perspective in a way that can be accepted or rejected by others. It is not our task to destroy what has meaning for some, but to create avenues to meaning for others, to invest the whole of life with meaning, with beauty, with wonder. It is hard. Once the vision has been caught, the frustration we feel as we try to achieve it will be great, but it is essential that progressive perspectives be presented with care and that they not be used as bulldozers. //

Over the course of the next years, we must find again that inspiration that was the spark for what has been an incredible journey toward wholeness but one that has, ironically, continued to fragment and judge, to deny rights and oppress. It is my hope and belief that this time, as we move forward into that same unknown, we might be the light we have always sought to be, a light that casts no shadows but that offers to all, no matter what their journey might entail, no matter what their need, the opportunity to share and receive wisdom, feed and be fed, delight and be delighted, encourage and be encouraged, seek and offer truth, embracing together its challenges and gifts. And as we find ourselves so embraced in the dance of humanity might we

finally arrive at a place of peace in which honouring, respecting, and protecting – that is, making sacred – the primal urge toward life experienced by all living things on the planet, becomes itself our only creed.

We have much on which to build. We hold deeply sacred beliefs about the value of life. We hold deeply sacred beliefs about the value of community. We hold deeply sacred beliefs about our responsibility for each other. None of these will be left behind. And if, for some of us, this talk is still about stepping into the unknown, then I believe we will find, as Overton says, that there will be ground beneath our feet or we will have wings to fly.

*It's time.*