

## PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY

Keith Rowe, April 2010, Common Dreams Conference, Melbourne

Until recently I simply described myself as Christian, without any qualifier. I now describe myself as Progressive Christian, not because my basic views have changed (though they have developed, hopefully matured) but because the views I have held in over 40 years of Christian ministry contrast dramatically with the more conservative theologies and understandings of the Christian role in society that dominate the church scene in our time. What are some of the emphases that characterise us?

Progressive Christianity is a contemporary form of Christian existence that has deep roots in the Christian tradition. We seek to contribute to the renewal of the Christian way and the human adventure through rethinking Christian belief in the light of insights and understandings not available to earlier generations and to the renewal of Christian living through recapturing the radical social implications of the way of life embodied in Jesus. There is no single creed that binds Progressive Christians together though there are emphases that bind them together as a renewal movement within the Christian Church. It's a loose, cross-denominational network rather than an organised entity. Many are seeking an escape from the coercive and heavily creedal and structural uniformity traditionally demanded by churches. Every person must do their own believing yet within the supportive and critical environment of a community of fellow pilgrims. There are common emphases and attitudes that define progressive Christianity.

Progressive Christians recognise that truth is larger than what the Christian church believes and does. God is understood to be active in all areas of life, bringing new insight, new appreciations of the wonder of creation to birth. Truth is larger than can be held within the formulations or theologies of any tradition, any religion, any scientific conclusion, any political or economic system, any philosophy, ancient tradition or holy book. So progressive Christians seek to live in conversation with all areas of human knowing, experience and exploration – philosophical formulations, scientific exploration, literary insight into the human condition, economic and political systems, the experience of the poor and of the wealthy, the various cultures that shape human communities, and most importantly for our present discussion, the religions of the world. This commitment to inter-human conversation, built on respect and willingness to learn, makes progressive Christians suspect to conservative Christians who are dedicated to building sharp boundaries around Christian truth.

Progressive Christians see themselves as living within a river of life that is never static. Older formulations and ways of living that no longer serve the cause of human flourishing need to be reshaped or radically altered. While Progressive Christians respect the traditions they have inherited they refuse to be enslaved by them. Where life giving convictions are enshrined in these traditions they frequently need to be recast in the language and thought forms and in response to the needs of contemporary living. So, for instance, Progressive Christians understand God as creative love present within all of life and luring humanity and creation towards its fulfilment rather than as a distant ruler who controls creation from afar and who intervenes in miraculous and powerful ways.

Progressive Christians value the Christian Bible and respect the holy books and traditions of other faiths. We welcome scholarship that helps us understand, demystify and interpret these ancient words so that they may offer direction to those seeking to

serve the purposes of God. They believe that all forms of fundamentalism, biblical, organisational or theological are prisons that diminish human life and often serve to justify violent and anti-human behaviours. Progressive Christians are not imprisoned by what the Bible says. The Biblically endorsed prejudice against homosexuality and the ambivalent attitude towards women, for example, are set aside as serious denials of the essential dignity of every person, who the same Christian Bible declares are made in the image of God. Where violence is sanctioned within the Biblical story this is not regarded as providing religious sanction for contemporary imperialistic adventures by so-called Christian nations.

The heart of Christian living and conviction is found for Progressive Christians in the way of life pioneered by Jesus, called the Christ. Progressive Christians seek to be shaped by the way of life taught and embodied by Jesus while also dwelling in conversation with the world in which they live. Both elements are important. Progressive Christians value critical study of the gospels as part of their continuing search for the initial life affirming impulse that brought Christianity into being and tended to be submerged by later heresy hunting, crusades and willing involvement in the imperial designs of successive empires. Jesus is understood to be an embodiment of the purposes of God but not necessarily the sole embodiment of those purposes. The world needs Jesus but not as a credal prison or an offer of salvation that if not accepted leads to death in this life and the next. The world will be a better place if together we can weave the hospitality, peace making energy, generosity and forgiveness apparent in the ministry of Jesus into every area of human living. Jesus, we suggest, represents an evolutionary possibility for the human family.

Progressive Christians believe humans are responsible for the sort of world we live in and tend to be critical of contemporary economic, social and political structures that serve the interests of wealthy nations and persons, lead to wars shaped by imperialist mentalities and the degradation of creation in the interests of wealth creation.

Progressive Christians are convinced that along with a sharper concern for issues of justice and peace and care for creation we need also to be developing ways of living more deeply in the love of God. We talk a lot about spirituality. Some ancient pathways to God are being rediscovered and most importantly many are learning to live within the larger pool of spiritual wisdom represented by the other religions.

It is important to recognise that progressive Christianity is part of the Christian Church and seeks the renewal of Christianity as a source of renewal within a tired and often violent world. Though often embarrassed by the actions and believing of other Christians we cannot deny we belong to the same family. You will be aware there is a battle going on within Christianity between those who seek a more open and socially committed stance and those who seek the retention of older and often life denying and divisive theologies and styles of living. Progressive Christians, while existing within current denominational expressions of Christianity, are often uncertain as to how much energy they can devote to changing the minds and hearts of co-religionists who march to a different tune. If the progressive components of the great religions of the world were to work together in the search for a more just, peaceful and creation-caring human community we might not only contribute to human well-being but also contribute to the renewal of our respective religious traditions.