

## MY JOURNEY INTO PROGRESSIVE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

began in childhood, when my beloved grandfather told me of a missionary and a sailor who, after their ship had sunk, found themselves in a lifeboat out in the middle of the ocean. The missionary offered to pray to God for deliverance. The sailor said, "You pray, ma'am, and I'll row." Grandpa showed me how unreasonable it was to expect God to do what we have the intelligence and strength to do for ourselves. Without knowing it Grandpa was teaching me to question later in life the theology of my fundamentalist friends and relations -- especially their insistence that their God was like a larger than life male human being who knew everything about everybody and was capable of powerfully intervening in human history on their behalf, a God who could arbitrarily change the laws of nature to please himself or his faithful believers.

My next big progressive step was in early adulthood, when as a young red-necked evangelical I had embraced a world view in which God would literally feed me and clothe me if only I had enough faith. So, believing that I had a monopoly on Truth, I had gone to Papua New Guinea to save the lost. But I soon discovered that the world was not like that. A progressive God had arrived in the hearts and minds of my dear New Guinean friends ahead of me. Some of them had a God like mine! That same God was not going out of His way to look after me if I was not prepared to work for a living or keep in regular communication with my generous evangelical friends. Come to think of it, why should I expect God to feed and clothe the missionary when the natives had nothing to sleep on but chewed up sugar cane on the dirt floor of their grass hut? It was I who needed saving from a colonial view of Christian evangelism.

It was soon after leaving the fundamentalist mission that I entered a modernist theological college and went to university. I recall after the occasion of my first lecture, writing in my diary that I would engage in a search for truth no matter where or from whom it could be discovered. Bible believing friends were sceptical about my being led astray by false teaching, but it set me on a course which automatically opened my understanding to extra-biblical knowledge, and revelations from the field of science and philosophy. I was beginning to doubt the traditional interpretation of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God. I was entering a phase in which I was selecting bits of the Bible that made sense to me, or that I could make sense of as allegory. e.g. the miracles, the creation stories, and the story of Jonah. But I still retained a theistic view of God.

The impact of modern scholarship on my beliefs passed me by, until around 1970 when progressive literature began to become more popular. I well remember my belief in prophecies of the resurrection being challenged. If Jesus of Nazareth knew that he was going to survive the Cross, what kind of a sacrifice was that?? In retrospect, it would have made a mockery of the atonement if he had known that after it was all over (as the De Vinci Code now claims!) he was going to be able to marry Mary Magdalene. But I never ceased to be deeply moved by the torturing to death of a beautiful man who was

prepared to die for his dream of a kingdom of justice and love. It was then that I began to value the power and influence upon the world of a crucified Jesus and not a bodily resuscitated one, a real human being, a historical Jesus who didn't know and didn't really care what would happen to him so long as he remained within God's Realm of compassion and truth. I have never lost that sense of transforming love.

For the next 30 years my journey took me into the area of helping to mend human relationships and identifying with troubled minds and hearts. Circumstances had thrust me into the very places where the presence of my progressive God was to be found. My spiritual sustenance came from giving myself to others, and from the enrichment of sharing their grief and pain. I hadn't yet learned to name those experiences as sacred. But in reality like most of us, I was experiencing progressive religion before I had fully encountered it intellectually.

Upon my retirement ten years ago, with my counselling career behind me, I discovered that Bible scholars had been putting words around what I had actually been believing and doing for the previous twenty-five years!

The most significant change that I am now able to enunciate is in regard to my post modernistic understanding of the Bible. I no longer struggle to allegorise those stories. I no longer need to fit them into a historical sequence, or search for the true metaphysical meaning, or make them square with my cosmic world view. I have been freed from forcing Matthew's, or Luke's or Paul's beliefs into my mould. It is no longer the Word of God to me; it is a precious record of the Word of God as Matthew, Luke and Paul described it, and how people at another time and in a different culture have tried to put words around their experience of the Sacred. It remains for me to carve out my own belief system as they had to do. But what they and the early church said and did is not normative for me.

Secondly, I am learning to live with the mystery of God in whom we live and move and have our being. It is a God who for me does not fit with the personal attributes of divinity used in the traditional prayers, hymns and liturgies of the established church. My God is beyond human personality. It is just as weird to call God a female as it is to call God a male. It no longer makes sense to me to address God as if God had time to listen to me. I am now learning to be content with experiencing God's presence in my relationship with people and with nature. My God is now an all-of-life God; a happiness God, a sadness God, a braveness God, a fearfulness God, a conviviality God, a loneliness God, a pleasure-loving God, a suffering God. An insightful travelling companion of an unbeliever inspecting Auschwitz after the holocaust was asked where God was when all this was allowed to happen. His friend replied that God was in the pyramid of human skeletons who had struggled for life as the gas was released into the chambers. God is with you in your suffering and in mine. And the Source of those experiences is beyond my words to define, but it is real and meaningful.

Thirdly, I am enjoying my search for the historical Jesus whom I do not believe was the supernaturally conceived Son of God. What I can discover of his gracious life is a blessing to me, but not because he is supposed to be God the Son attributing original sin to me which he had to wash away with his blood. I am certain that he was crucified, but not for my personal salvation. He was executed by those who feared his subversion of their worldly realm. He died, not with me in mind, but for his faithfulness to his vision of the Realm of God. That kind of life and death in any human being has a transforming influence upon me, and that is why I can still call myself a Christian — because I want to live as much as is possible in the kind of Domain which Jesus and people like him personify and exemplify.