



A PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN VOICE AUSTRALIA

JULY 2020

The Conscience of the Streets

In an interview for Terrain magazine, environmental activist Kathleen Dean Moore describes the morning after Donald Trump finally pulled the U.S. out of the Paris Climate Accords after years of policy obfuscation:

.. this old climate warrior climbed out of bed feeling better about the chances of the sizzling, souring world than I had for months... The worst climate policy news had broken, and suddenly the sense of possibility and power was overwhelming. Why? The Poet Mizuta Masahide had the answer: Barn's burnt down -- now I can see the moon..

Twelve months ago it was impossible to imagine the nationwide implementation of flexible work systems, a responsible doubling of jobseeker allowance or a huge number of the homeless population accommodated off the street. The SARS-Covid-19 pandemic has brought the moral imperative of shared responsibility to the forefront of political life, and revealed the enormous capability of our governing bodies - but also the terrible ways in which we are *still* not in this together...

Asylum seekers and refugees remain housed in dangerously close centres, despite increased rates of immunocompromised health. The Australian arts sector was among the first to feel the devastation of covid19 cancellations but has received little more than grudging nod under economic recovery plans. And while streets across the world have filled with the demand for black and first nations voices to be finally heard, the Australian Christian Lobby has bizarrely labelled the movement "anti-Christ".

In this newsletter we explore this unprecedented space of disruption, welcoming Greg Jenk's timely analysis of religious weaponization as a response to Black Lives Matter, while Tiffany Sparks describes the increasing numbers of progressive Christians claiming the internet as a place of practice and de-mythologising many assumptions about the progressive 'boogiemans.'

On the Way' conversations with Sarah Bachelard and Jim Schirmer ask what it means for us to live as resurrection people in time of anxiety and invite us to embrace the gifts of Christian tradition that may help us reimagine the world through the experience of pandemic.

Finally Ray Barraclough reminds us of the opportunity of this moment, outlining a history of civil, theological and social movements that have taken up the necessary struggles where government initiative has failed. Kathleen Dean Moore calls this 'the conscience of the streets.'

The anti-slavery campaigns, the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, so many more, have been led [by] people walking from a church, holding hands and singing -- not from sudden moral awakening in the federal government. Signs are that this now is how it shall be.

Can we see the moon yet? How shall it be for us?

We therefore end this edition of APCVA newsletter with Ray's invitation to our members to be part of the visioning for APCVA. Where shall we go next? *We hope to hear from you soon.*

~APCVA Management Team.

Black Lives Matter To Jesus

There is an age-old divide among religious people about just what God—however understood—wants of humans. For the better part of 3,000 years in the Jewish and Christian spiritual traditions, there have been those stressing the need for purity (often expressed through codes about sex and food) and those who focus on justice for the victims of structural evil.

Recently, Martyn Iles, the Managing Director of the Australian Christian Lobby has stoked the kind of controversy that appeals to their base and drives their fund-raising efforts with a claim that the Black Lives Matter movement is “anti-Christ”. This is theological ‘dog-whistling’, and especially in the deliberate evoking of the biblical term ‘Antichrist’.

In the current context of global protests and persistent systemic discrimination against people of colour, this claim is highly partisan. It is also ‘tone-deaf’ to the cries of the oppressed which ascend to the God who has promised to hear them.

The intention to provoke (opponents) and alarm (supporters) was clear when—rather than apologise or retract those comments—Martyn Iles doubled down on them by producing a special podcast session with a 20-minute tirade against BLW as another example of radical secular Marxism seeking to destroy Christianity.

Despite his self-description as a “lover of law, theology and politics” (Facebook – About), Martyn Iles has no formal theology qualifications. His only listed qualifications are in the law. That lack of formal training in theology is evident in his public statements.

Iles espouses a fundamentalist form of Evangelical Christianity, with a fascination on apocalyptic eschatology. He has recently announced a new YouTube channel dealing with questions about the “End Times”.

The problem is not his naïve use of the complex texts which constitute the Bible, nor his total disconnect from critical religion scholarship. Both those things are typical of Australian Evangelicals. Rather, what concerns me most is the way that he ‘verbals’ Jesus by imposing his own concept of Christ onto the biblical texts.

The domesticated Jesus promoted by Martyn Iles does not engage in political action, so I presume he would neither support nor join the ACL. His Jesus only cares about ‘saving souls’ and did not care about feeding the hungry, healing the sick, or letting the oppressed go free (fact check that claim against Luke 4:18–19). Such a Jesus would not have bothered himself or his disciples with a campaign against a religious discrimination bill; or indeed opposed legislation for same-sex marriage. He just came to save souls.

This kind of Jesus crosses to the other side of the road when he encounters a victim lying wounded in the ditch. Nothing can be allowed to distract from saving souls. He would not have protected a woman from death by stoning at the hands of a self-righteous religious mob. He would have invited the lady to accept Jesus into her heart but done nothing to address the immediate danger of killing by the authorities.

It seems that Martyn Iles frets over a secular Marxism that he sees in the DNA of every social movement, but is blissfully unperturbed by the multiple structural injustices which have promoted white prosperity at the expense of black lives, not to mention indigenous Australian lives.

He notes the correlation of black deaths with crime rates in black neighbourhoods, but he does not question why we have black neighbourhoods nor why poverty is allowed to continue in the wealthiest societies we have ever seen on the planet. That myopia must be convenient.

Secular Marxism is a special worry to Martyn Iles. He recycles the nonsensical idea that a secret KGB operation created liberation theology (apparently an especially virulent form of secular Marxism) to subvert Catholicism in Latin America, while simultaneously infiltrating the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Some people do

The Fear of Online

While there are few good things to come out of a global pandemic, one positive is that more people are becoming online savvy. What was previously seen as space that is hard and scary to occupy has now become part of our everyday lives.

First were the technology concerns. In the past when I've talked about reaching out online, I would hear protest along the lines of - it is too hard to do, our parishioners won't use it, our parishioners are too old, what is the point of coming to Church then? But contrary to being crippled with fear, this crisis has seen communities respond with remarkable adaptation, and a desire to learn new technology, or simply find ways to use their phone or webcams.

I have been overwhelmed with the amount of people going out of their way to connect in creative ways—people of all ages. Every Sunday when I tune into the livestream, I love that Merle is watching with me and Merle is nearly 90 years old.

'What is the point of coming to Church then?' We know that there is no satisfactory substitute for being physically present to each other. Nothing can compare with it. Yet, in this situation when we keenly feel the loss of physically gathered community, online mediums reveal familiar faces, convey encouraging words, carry on the patterns of our faith, and offer a connectivity that for me, sufficiently overcomes any hesitation to try.

But what if I say the wrong thing? What if people disagree with me? What if people realise that I'm progressive! The fear of being theologically 'outed' in the online space existed long before the covid-19 environment, and no doubt going online involves being brave and steadfast in our theological journey.

But as a result of occupying the online space, we've seen some dispelling of myths surrounding the 'progressive boogie man' who doesn't believe in Jesus, or the Bible, let alone any of its contents. It has revealed that progressive Christians aren't a bunch of angry humanists but faithful, sincere people passionate about the Gospel imperatives of fullness of life, equality and a God that loves each and everyone of us.

In fact, going online has caused people to think they might even be a little 'progressive' themselves.



Nonetheless, the online space remains a little daunting for its uncontrollability. The comments section can be notorious for hateful and hurtful expressions. You never know who is viewing your content and once something is out there, it is hard to take it back.

My husband and I have always said to our kids, whatever you put online, be prepared to yell from the mountain top. Likewise, whatever we preach, we should be prepared to preach from the mountain top and if we can't do

that, then we probably shouldn't be saying it anyway.

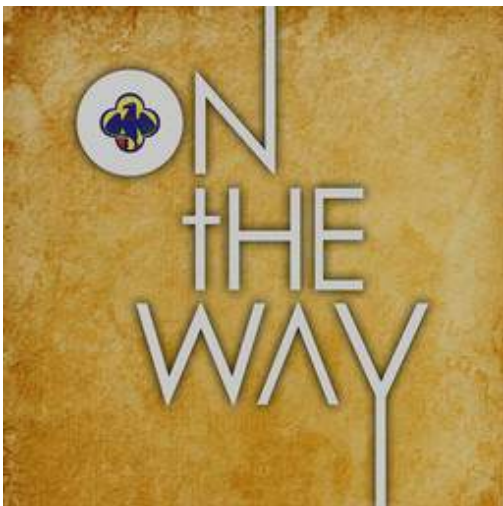
What we have learnt over this crisis is that people are much more interested in hearing the message than picking holes, searching for heresies and typing hurtful words... and you can always turn the comments section off!

The online space has revealed much about ourselves, our communities and our abilities. We've learned that we are braver than we thought. We've learned just how much we love gathering as a community—and nothing will change that—but we're also willing and completely able to take on what seems like impossible situations and rise above them. I never thought I would see the day where the ABC broadcasted the St. John's Cathedral in Brisbane.



People are out there hungering for practice and theology that they can connect with. Going online has given people a way to dip their toe in, and see what this could look like for them. The online environment encourages the seeking of connection, and plants a seed in a way that feels safe. My prayer is that we grow confident in this online space, and continue on finding new ways to communicate and connect with people.

The Venerable Tiffany Sparks, Archdeacon of the Anglican Diocese of Grafton.



On The Way Podcasts

FINDING A CONTEMPLATIVE WAY FORWARD

The Rev'd Dr Sarah Bachelard joins Dom, Sue and Peter in a conversation about the creative possibilities of a contemplative life to ground us in the midst of uncertain times. How do we find a way in times of anxiety to "be with what is", rather than try to resist what cannot be changed? Join us as we explore the gifts of silence and stillness to help us to embrace the potentialities of a world reimagined through this experience of pandemic. Sarah is the founder of Benedictus Contemplative Church based in Canberra. She is an Anglican priest, theologian, retreat leader, and author.

DISCIPLESHIP FROM A DISTANCE

Peter, Dom and Sue are joined by author and previous podcast guest, Jim Schirmer to talk about being the church in a time where we have to be disciples distanced from one another. What does it mean to be walking the way of the cross in a time of pandemic and to be resurrection people in a time of anxiety? Holy Week presents new challenges as we journey to the cross and the empty tomb in these days before us when themes of life and death are in such vivid focus. This context provides a new vantage point to explore some of the ideas in Jim's book, "The Way of the Rabbi: Stories of Discipleship from the Gospel of Mark."

Download here: <https://omny.fm/shows/on-the-way/playlists/podcast>

Working Towards A Vision for Australia

The experience of the Corona Virus has prompted a number of articles seeking to envisage the future dimensions of Australian society, industry, education – to name just several key components of life in this country.

Choosing a year, or a health crisis, both for recollection and for foresight is an arbitrary choice. For example, back in 1988, there were fumbling efforts to work out what was to be the national public focus for the Bicentenary. Was it to be white settlement or invasion or expropriation or survival? And what lay behind 1988, both in the immediately preceding years and a century beforehand?

Academic George Shaw, [1] commenting on the historians who contributed to the publication of *1988 And All That – New views of Australia's past*, was speaking broadly when he wrote:

Australia enters its third century optimistic of humanist change much as it entered its second century hopeful of socialist change. That is one message written into Australian non-fiction Bicentennial writings. Another message is that Australian humanism, like Australian socialism before it, is without doctrines. It has a literary, social, political and racial agenda, but no systematic intellectual or philosophical agenda. It is founded on sentiment, and is best summed up by the acronym ASH: Australian Sentimental Humanism.

As background to his brief analysis, the period from the 1880s to the 1920s witnessed an un-paralleled growth in the trade union movement [2] and in reforms towards a more egalitarian society. [3]

In the decades leading up to 1988, humanist-egalitarian currents were also gathering momentum after the dormant 1940s and 1950s. Environmental concerns, epitomised in the person of trade union leader Jack Mundey, brought new vision to Australian building codes. The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s was a largely humanist inspired surge, often in the face of religious obstructionism. [4]

The anti-Vietnam war rallies nationally, and the anti-Joh movements in Queensland, also were energetic movements in the Australian landscape. The 'anti' in them was fuelled by a grand array of groups with positive visions - both shared and varied - of what Australia could be and could become.



And in the theological scene, liberation theology seeped even into some quarters of the churches. More so amongst non-parochial clergy, those working closest to the more vulnerable in Australia, rather than being shared with Australia at the top. Feminist theology, too, needs to be more widely known in the Australian political and religious landscape. The prevailing abysmal pattern of violence against women

may mean that APCVA needs to focus particularly on communicating with church leaders, and especially challenging those leaders who dogmatically assert male headship over women. Women's full equality - in ecclesiastical as well as economic realms - is still to be realised in Australian society.

And what of the present time?

Speaking broadly, visionary reform has tended to come from the left side of politics. The starkest contrast in the present era probably was that between the static William McMahon and his successor as Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.

In the 75 years since the end of World War II, federally conservatives have been in government for 49 years and Labor for 26 years. So Australia has, it seems, an inbuilt tendency not to venture, but to be more of a gated country. Whether it was the creed of 'white Australia', or 'anti-Chinese' or 'anti-Asian' neuroses, our political genes come from a mixed pool with some muddy waters.

An Invitation to Members

I admit that what I have given is but a brief and fragmented overview. If the present time is to be an occasion for re-assessment and future visioning, then *APCVA needs input from its members as regards those two tasks.*

On the APCVA Webpage there are valuable starting points. I refer particularly to the articles entitled:
Reflecting forward for the next three years – by Len Baglow.
APCVA Agenda for [2019] election.

What is also needed is a contribution of depth as regards intellectual, theological, social and political bases and visioning. What role *APCVA* can play in making that contribution depends on we *APCVA* members.

This article thus ends with an invitation to our members. The Management Committee would welcome from you any deepening of vision, rationale and suggested action that we can contribute to the communal life and well-being of this nation and its international neighbours.

Ray Barraclough 3 May, 2020.

1. In 1988, George was Reader in History and Director of the Australian Studies Centre at the *University of Queensland*. He lectured in *Australian history*. He was also an Anglican priest. 2. See in particular the 4 volume work of T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, Oxford University Press, 1918. 3. For example, legislation was passed in various states as well as the Federal Parliament to enable women to vote. The list reads: S.A: 1895, W.A. 1899, NSW 1902, Tas 1903, Qld 1905, Vic 1908. The Australian parliament 1902. Through the 1880's and 1890's there were petitions, rallies, lobbying for this reform 4. The movement of women into the wider paid workforce from the 1960's onwards has been a significant factor in the decline in church attendance witnessed over the last 50 years. That emancipation was generally opposed by conservative Christians and conservative churches. They considered that males were to be the head of the household and the paid worker ('bread-winner') in the family. Male headship is still tightly taught in conservative evangelical churches.

Renewal of Membership

Please note:

- A.** Renewal of membership is due by 30 June, 2020
- B.** Members who have joined *APCV* this year [2020] can renew their membership in 2021.
- C.** Renewal fee, and any other contribution, can best be processed either by

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Categories of Membership

Individual: Waged \$20 Unwaged \$10 Student \$5
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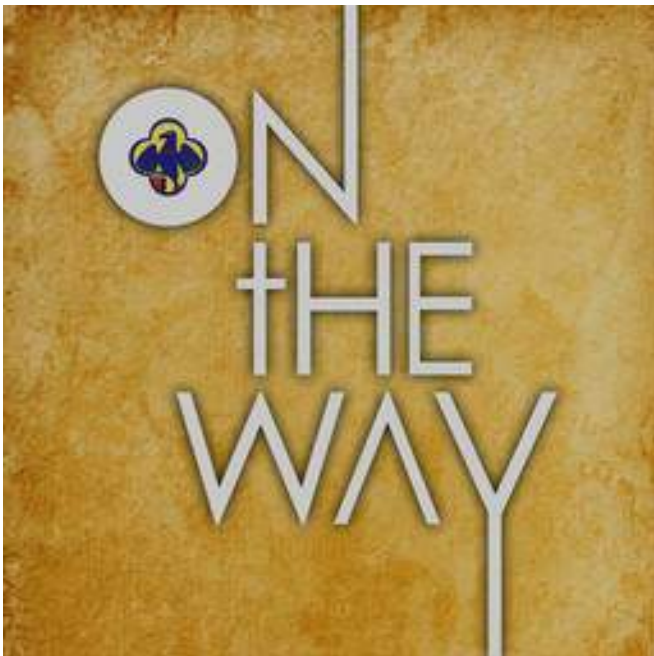
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- understands Christian opinion to be more diverse and broader than that portrayed by the media
 - is dedicated to contributing insights from progressive streams of the Christian faith and community
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- welcomes fresh and challenging contemporary insights into the interpretation of the Christian scriptures and tradition
- does not speak on behalf of any Christian denomination, congregation, community or organisation
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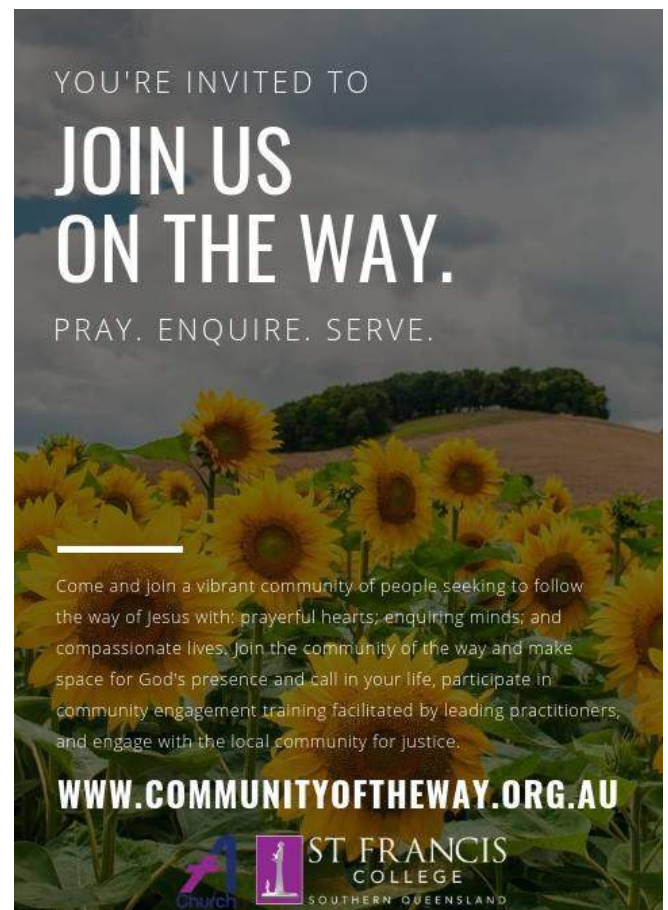
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