

# THE 'PROGRESSIVE' STORY IN AUSTRALIA

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This year 2007, in Australia at least, is the Year of Politics.

A year when politicians attempt to 'wedge' opponents and 'woo voters' prior to an election. And where we have already seen some do a chameleon trick - and change their colours on such previously closed fist issues as climate change, education, and indigenous affairs.

Maybe their conversion would carry more weight, even some weight, if they hadn't deliberately conned us so often before! But what seems not to have changed is the control politicians in general seek to maintain over free speech and the freedom of thought and information. Especially the free speech of journalists to scrutinise or criticise government policy, and public servants to hold or offer a position other than that of the government's.

The most recent alarming example was when the current head of the Prime Minister's Department - acclaimed to be the most senior Public Servant in our National Capital, Canberra - was reported to have said:

"Public servants do not have a moral responsibility to act on their own judgment of the public interest when they assess the government has got it wrong" (*Quoted in Carlton, SMH, 30/6/07. Pg: 38*).

As one newspaper commentator responded:

"Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot would have applauded that one"  
(*Carlton, SMH, 30/6/07. Pg: 38*).

As it often is in the world of politics, so too is it often in the world of church and religion.

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A progressive religious expression within Christianity and Unitarianism in

Australia, is not new. In one form or another it has been around for nearly a 170 years or so. Various historical resources tell us, for instance, the first Unitarian church in Australia was established in Sydney in 1850 by a Revd. Stanley. The Melbourne Unitarian Church was founded two years later, in 1852. While the church in Adelaide was founded in 1855, by English settlers. In New Zealand the story is similar: the first Unitarian congregation was formed in Auckland, in 1863.

Similarly, efforts at establishing progressive Jewish synagogues in both Melbourne and Sydney date from 1882 and 1932 respectively, with the first enduring Liberal or Progressive congregation being founded in Melbourne in 1930, and Sydney's Temple Emanuel founded eight years later.

Now, what is new about the current progressive Christian expression, is this open and pluralistic faith is 'coming out' or resurfacing in many congregations in mainline Christian churches, despite or in spite of, archbishops, moderators and 'religious right' lobby groups. As well it is giving sustenance and support to thousands of disillusioned individuals who "love the Christ and leave the Church" (*Murray 2000*) as New Zealand songwriter Shirley Murray puts it, and who now meet in informal, safe, discussion/nurturing groups in a dynamic grassroots movement. Some of the more formal groups are included among the sponsors of this Conference:

Sea of Faith in Australia  
Progressive Christianity Network, South Australia  
The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought, Canberra  
The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought, Sydney  
Progressive Spirituality Network, Brisbane  
Progressive Christian Network of Victoria  
Progressive Evangelical Network, Sydney  
The Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship, Kirribilli.

And symbolized by your presence at this inaugural 'progressive' Conference.

Those from overseas who have nurtured the current movement within Christianity are now well known: Jack Spong, Marcus Borg, Karen Armstrong,

Richard Holloway, Matthew Fox. Before them were Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John A T Robinson, Harvey Cox and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. While locally grown contributions – sometimes overshadowed by the volumes of printed resources from their overseas colleagues – have come from such as Charles Birch, Norman Habel, Val Webb, Michael Morwood. And from poets and hymn writers as Shirley Murray, Wm Wallace and Colin Gibson. All generally accept the moral responsibility - to repaginate our most senior Canberra Public Servant - to act on their own theological judgment when they assess the church or scholarship has got it wrong.

So what of the Australian progressive story. Let me offer a personal note to begin with. Then a brief introduction to five ‘first generation’ (and one second generation) persons of interest who have helped shape the ‘progressive/liberal’ story.

My personal journey started in the mid 1960s while I was still in theological college in Melbourne. Having already been given advice by my local minister that I should read the theology of a bloke called Samuel Angus, and been introduced to Process Theology by some student colleagues, a group of four of us, all Presbyterians, agreed to establish an editorial committee and commence publication of an informal theological journal called: *Catalyst: A journal of progressive religious thought*. It had a small circulation, around 100 or so, and remained in publication until the end of 1974. This was probably the first time the term ‘progressive’ was intentionally used in relationship to Australian christianity in particular, although there now appears to have been an earlier personal ‘echo’.

Little remains of our printed efforts of progressive articles, sermons, reviews and liturgical offerings, as ink-soaked Gestetner stencils and high-acid duplicating paper were either destroyed or disintegrated – taking with them dreams as well as mistakes. Now there are progressive web sites. Prior to our publication the term generally used in such circles was ‘liberal’. But as many of you would know, using that title is not always helpful in Australia!

On the other hand, there have been several individuals in Australia who have worn or been given the title 'liberal', more often than not in a pejorative sense: Charles Strong, Samuel Angus, Ted Noffs, Norman Habel, Ray Richmond, Peter Cameron - just to name a few. So threatened by their existence, the institutional church often charged them, or threatened to charge them, with heresy - the holding of doctrine 'contrary to straight thinking'.

So let me introduce my personal short collection of foremothers and forefathers of progressive religious thought - Australian style.

**Catherine Spence** (1825-1910) came to South Australia from Scotland in 1839 at a time when the colony

"had experienced several years of drought and the contrast to her native Scotland made her 'inclined to go out and cut my throat'  
(*Wikipedia*).

Spence, a feminist Unitarian, is recognized as Australia's

"first truly professional woman journalist and first female political candidate, as well as a fearless social and political reformer"  
(*A biography: State Library, South Australia*).

Known as 'the greatest Australian woman' and given the epitaph 'Grand Old Woman of Australia', Spence is commemorated on the Australian five dollar note, printed in 2001 and issued for the centenary of Federation. When she wanted a change from her own Unitarian church, Spence attended the Wellington Square Primitive Methodist Church in North Adelaide (*Hilliard 2006:8*).

Like Spence, **Charles Strong** (1844-1942) also came to Australia from Scotland. For some today, Strong is regarded as the first genuine theological progressive in Australia, with comparisons to John Shelby Spong (*Gardner 2006*).

Ordained into the broad Church of Scotland in 1868, his success as a "pastor, preacher, liberal theological teacher and social reformer" (*Brighton Cemeterians*) led to

his appointment as minister of Scots Church, Melbourne in 1875. For the next eight years Strong was never far away from controversy and is acknowledged as one of the most controversial clergymen in the history of the Victorian Presbyterian Church.

Strong described his theology as “broad or liberal” (*Badger 1971: 51*) which, he said, was “absolutely necessary to a minister of the gospel in order to the development of a healthy Christian life” (*Badger 1971:51*). Such a theology had several characteristics:

- (i) it was fluid;
- (ii) thinks of God as an indwelling, energising Spirit;
- (iii) God was manifested in Humanity – Humanity was God’s ‘Son’;
- (iv) love and justice were always working together;
- (v) allied itself with science, and
- (vi) is based on human experience rather than an infallible book  
(*Badger 1971:285*).

Unable to resolve differences with the Presbyterian Church, with the threat of a charge of heresy for “promulgating and publishing heretical and unsound doctrine” (*McEachran*) sponsored by a group of evangelicals, hanging over his head, Strong resigned. In 1885 he assisted in founding the Australian Church – a free, non-sectarian, undogmatically-based religious fellowship “largely composed of religious liberals and ex-members and adherents of Scots Church” (*Brighton Cemeterians*).

The underlying idea of the Australian Church was that it should

“attempt to provide a favourable climate and a home for those who were convinced of the significance and importance of religion, but who were unable to accept the traditional formulae of the churches and a theology derived from the past” (*Badger 1971:106*).

Some notes from the Australian Church’s own literature reads:

“The Australian Church aims at being a comprehensive Church, whose bond of union is the spiritual and the practical rather than creeds or ecclesiastical forms. It recognises the principles that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, that ‘by one Spirit are we

baptised into the one Body' and that it is hurtful to truth, honesty and spiritual life to hamper either minister or people by imposing on them the interpretation of the Gospel or the theologies handed down from olden time..." (Badger 1971:104).

While it appears to have been the hope of some of the original founders of the Australian Church that it might become a truly national church, attempts at founding branches in Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane were not successful.

Around this time, in 1884, an Englishman named **George T Walters** (1853-1926) was appointed to the Melbourne Unitarian Christian Church at Eastern Hill.

Walters was a gifted and eloquent preacher but

"his congregation became increasingly uneasy about his secular interests and his radical political and theological views" (ADB).

When in 1888, three years after Strong had founded the Australian Church, Walter's church committee "reinstated the Lord's Prayer in the service" (ADB), Walters resigned in protest and moved to Sydney to the Hyde Park Unitarian Church. But 10 years later in 1898, after another round of conflict with a church committee, Walters

"led most of his congregation out of the Unitarian Church and set up a branch of the Australian Church. [Later] in 1903 the two congregations amalgamated as the Australian Unitarian Church" (ADB).

Walters embraced David Strauss' biblical criticism and Darwin's theory of natural selection, rejected the Trinity and the doctrine of 'eternal torment', established a theological journal *Modern Thought* to publish his different views in, as well as sponsored literary and social union within the church. He was also a member of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts committee - which is why that place is one of the meeting places of this Conference. So in more ways than one, we are coming home!

The most celebrated Australian "arch-heretic of Australian Presbyterianism" (Geard 1991) was Irish born, **Samuel Angus** (1881-1943). After studies at both Princeton and Hartford theological seminaries, Angus was appointed Professor of New

Testament within the Faculty of Theology at Sydney's St Andrew's College in 1914, at age 32.

A 'classics' scholar, Angus soon found his academic staff at St Andrew's, "conservative" (ADB). Following the 'higher criticism' of the European liberal thinker Harnack, he "contrasted 'the religion of Jesus' with 'the religion about Jesus'" (ADB), believed the original message and figure of the historical Jesus could be discerned through a critical study of the New Testament, and questioned the historicity of the virgin birth, the physical resurrection and ascension, and the theory of the atonement, forming The Heretics Club in 1916.

About Angus' 'divine immanence' theology - an expression also used to describe Charles Strong's theology - Winifred Ward writes:

"To his students he repeatedly stressed his belief that 'it matters little what we believe about Christ but it matters supremely for ourselves and for the world how much of Christ is lived in us, or to what extent we are Christ-like'" (Ward 1996:8).

With his orthodoxy increasingly questioned by the Sydney Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church, fundamentalists attempted to lay a charge of heresy against him in 1933. Angus was never officially charged, but the 'whiff of heresy' and his non-trial lasted for nearly 10 years until his death. Lamenting their lack of success one fundamentalist wrote 50 years later:

"The conservatives had good reason to try and remove Angus, he rejected all the major doctrines of Christianity... Unfortunately they lacked the numbers to take decisive action against him" (Geard 1991).

Ironically, the same Presbytery within the same church, brought heresy charges against another St Andrew's principal, **Peter Cameron**, in 1993, when in a sermon he suggested women should be ordained and "the [biblical books] had to be understood within the context of the times in which they were written" (*Presbyterian Fellowship online*).

Returning to South Australia, London born **Alfred Sykes** (1871-1940) arrived in Adelaide in 1904 to take up the post of minister of Stow Memorial Congregational Church, known as the 'cathedral church' of Congregationalism in South Australia.

Tall and red-headed "Sykes thrived on debate and had a restless, inquiring mind" (ADB). Flinders University historian David Hilliard writes of Sykes:

"In Adelaide, Sykes was the first to expound from the pulpit the ideas of R. J. Campbell's *The new theology* (1907), a book that in England had triggered a storm of controversy on a scale that was not repeated until the publication of John Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963" (Hilliard 2006:5).

His interest in developing a 'deep church' led him to emphasis liturgy, while at the same time he remodelled Stow Memorial by creating a raised sanctuary with a central Communion Table, and had the pulpit moved from its central position to the side.

Finally, bridging the Tasman is a second generation progressive, **Lloyd Geering** (1918 -). Born in New Zealand but having lived and taught in both Australia and New Zealand, Geering is best remembered for his high-profile 1967 heresy trial within the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand – an action that church still seems to favour today when addressing progressive theology!

In several sermons preached and articles written between 1965 and 1967 Geering suggested why a new reformation in the church was overdue. "Is the Christian faith inextricably bound up with the world-view of ancient mankind", he wrote, "or can the substance of it be translated into the worldview of twentieth century mankind?" (Geering). He claimed the Bible was not literally inerrant, questioned the idea "of a physical resurrection" (Kohn 2004) and suggested humans had no 'immortal soul'. A veritable storm erupted. Geering writes:

"The gap that had been opening up between traditional and popular Christian thought on the one hand, and academic enquiry on the other, had finally reached breaking point" (Geering).

After calls for his resignation or at the very least, his immediate dismissal, and following hours of debate in presbyteries, congregations, and in national newspapers, the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, in the full glare of television cameras and journalists, declared that it found “no doctrinal error has been established, dismisses the charges, and declares the case closed” (*Geering*). During the whole of this time Geering was Professor of Old Testament Studies and Principal of Knox College Theological Hall in Dunedin, but shortly afterwards he resigned to become Professor of Religious Studies in Victoria University in Wellington.

“Many in the church heaved a sigh of relief,” he writes, “and I entered an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and calm I had not felt for some time” (*Geering*).

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And so ends my very brief introduction to progressive religious thought in this ‘down under’ part of the world. For an introduction to some other second generation progressives, I suggest Winifred Ward’s book, **Men ahead of their time**. There, Ward introduces the life and theologies of five second generation Australian Christian ‘progressives’ – all former New South Wales Methodists, with several of them probably happy to accept the title ‘progressive evangelical’ - each of whom came under the influence of two first generation members of The Heretics Club, Samuel Angus and Kenneth Edward.

For now let me claim one thing: of our liberal/progressive history we can be proud, despite the claim that it is now “being led by old white men” (*Boughen 2003*). Our forebears role in deconstruction was and remains, very important as they put ‘progressive’ religion on the public agenda. Let us build on their courage and social justice commitment – even as they were unable to “escape (their) conditioning and social circumstances” (*Rule 2006*). However, I am reminded of a comment educationalist John Westerhoff said 30 years ago. Agreeing that theological reflection is important, such reflection he said:

“... never won the people’s hearts... [and] their emphasis on the

intellectual mode of consciousness has contributed to the demise of intuition and the sickness of the spiritual life” (Westerhoff 1979:22).

This is an important warning which progressives ignore at their peril. While each of my ‘persons of interest’ differed in their journey and intellectual pursuits - and yes, their language sometimes jars - we can hear where they connect with aspects of the current Christian ‘progressive’ characteristics as espoused by, for example, USA researcher Hal Taussig:

1. An insistence on christianity with intellectual integrity,
2. A transgression of traditional gender boundaries,
3. The belief that christianity can be vital without claiming to be the best or the only true religion,
4. Strong ecological and social justice commitments (Taussig 2006).

But we progressives need to take the additional step also suggested by Taussig - the shaping of a spiritual vitality and expressiveness. To undertake if you like, both a re-imagining and a reconstruction of, “a new Sunday Morning experience from scratch: new music, new liturgy, new scriptures, new ceremonies, new rites of passage” (Funk 2005:2) as was outlined by Robert Funk of the Jesus Seminar a couple of years back. It is not enough just to move on from a literalism which seems to require belief in six impossible things before breakfast! Our hearts also need to be won.

So, may this brief personal expose empower and inspire us to continue the journey first chartered by these, our first generation foremothers and forefathers in a ‘down under’ progressive faith.

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