

From Christian to Post-Christian: A Journey of Faith in Freedom

Kaurna welcome.

First, thank Sue and the wider PCNet community for the invitation. I'm flattered to be asked and heartened by your broad-minded invitation to someone outside your tent to come and speak. And the invitation came after a couple talks I gave at the common dreams conference last October in Brisbane, which were enthusiastically received by many of your progressive fellows.

So I'm grateful to feel so welcomed.

I think.

At the very least, I'm a fish out of water here. At most I'm stumbling about behind enemy lines with a big target on my back and there would be no consequences for any of you taking potshots at a heretic minister you'll never have to see again if you don't want to.

I take heart though, that at least I have brothers/sisters in arms here to back me up if I need it. So I thank David Freesmith and Sandy Johns who've taken time from their busy and productive non-church lives for being here tonight. Neither of these folks are trained ministers nor are they theologians; what they are is comparatively new members who have displayed what used to be called discipleship in various aspects of church life. In short, they're the sort of members a good church hopes to attract, inspire, and send forth.

It may deescalate talking to you about our church in **your** church if point out that I've not come to deliver a sales pitch, not evangelism, not a recruitment drive.

It's NOT to bring light to the benighted. Not anti-Cx, not anti-God.

It's also not a graduate level theological argument.

It's more an offer, a sharing of things we've found nourishing, a breaking of bread of a sort we've prepared and offering to you in the hope you'll like it too. And if you do—great! And if not...well, think of it as a smorgasbord—take what you like

and leave what you don't or like fried chicken—eat the meat, leave the bones. Only dogs fight over bones.

What it is is an exploration of freedom and pluralism as it was applied to Cx, which UUism ix descended from.

“Religious” in the broadest sense, with the aim to bind together that which has been sundered, and to take steps to heal what chasm between us that has grown wider since first we were disserved.

To start this offering, let me share with you in on a little UU in-joke we like to tell ourselves. ...

Catholic puppies.

UCA puppies

UU puppies Okay these are exactly the same dogs you were selling a week ago under other church auspices. How are these UU puppies now?

Well, she says, they're eyes have opened.

Tell this to a room full of UUs and they laugh and laugh.

But it does us no credit at all, this notion that we've evolved, grown up, achieved some perfectly clear-sighted objectivity.

In a world so in need of bridges and connection, this smart-ass attitude puts up just another wall.

And bridging is my real aim, not just as a UU, but as a minister and 'a man of God'—a genuinely religious person wants to foster mutually nourishing connections between people. Now this isn't always possible “if they have stopped their ears and hardened their hearts” ...it assumes a willingness on BOTH sides to move a little. And since you're Progressive, you must be willing to move a little, mustn't you? And that's true dialogue—when both sides are willing to move.

For our part, there have been a few recent UUA articles reminding us to make sure we're creating room for theists if we take (Christly notion) inclusion at all seriously. And it would seem Progressive Christian would be our natural allies, since we hold some many values (if not all the doctrine) in common. So that's why we're here.

Enough preamble: **here are pictures of a church** that moved and changed in its 160 year history in this town, and its progress sits within the larger shifting within the UU movement itself. It was the UCCSA, est. 1854. It became the UCSA in 1977 (6 years after move to Norwood). How significant the dropping of that one word made. And yet **we incorporated, when we moved, much of the iconography**, the stained glass, the brass plates, the marble memorials and son on, symbolically bridging the old and new, not a erasing of history.

According to Alan Kirby, our minister emeritus who led the church through this transition, the discussion to drop 'Christian' was the result of two years discussion and resulted in the loss of zero members. The consensus was that the former title no longer represented the values or character of the (then) congregation. I have theories about why...(chesterton) When I arrived, 20 years later, a rift (schism) was still evident between those who wanted to continue explore the Christian tradition exclusively in the U manner (free from creed, received dogma), and those who were embracing the new UU traditions of rational humanism that come to the fore after the 1960's USA merger of U and U. In part, this schism was, and continues to be, a proxy war between the fading British empire (who founded the church like they did the SA colony) and the rise of post-war USA hegemony. These cultural influences are like tectonic plates that shift and grate even today. By the time I was heading off for ministry training in 2009, this schism has resolved (mostly through generational change) to favour the latter. In fact, God talk was unofficially frowned upon, though Jesus was still on our walls. Afe we a U or a UU—easy, we're both!

And so we have, in effect become what's become known as 'post-Christian'. And Just like **post-modernism was a reaction to modernity**, the Post-Cx could not exist without Cx to respond to. It's important to note the cultural shift from modern to postmodern was happening at about the same time as the shift in UUism from Cx to post Cx--here's a primer.

Like postmodernity, **post-Christian is inclusive** of Christianity but not limited to it exclusively. I can preach Cx values in comfort and integrity, but in comfort and integrity I cannot preach ONLY that. Lacking the Cxs creed we covenant around **7 principles**, depicted here, are notable for two things—first, they were not made up on the back of a napkin, but the result of 500 years of liberal theology boiling

Cx down its to irreducible essences. Second: there is no hierarchy among these values—there is however, a human core (worth--universalism) in a cosmology (interdependent unity-unitarianism).

Like post-modernity, knowledge is drawn horizontally—rhizomatically--rather than top-down, allowing blending, conversation, dialectic. Casting the widest possible net to get the most comprehensive view, we 've identified 6 sources of wisdom we draw from. See that Cx is included as one part, not the whole.

How this plays out is that we've retained a subtext and approach that would be familiar to Cx—shape and pattern of worship, idea of church as a self-selected community called forth to bear witness, and a mission to redeem the world. So We have the Cx DNA, but we are not Cx, just as I have my father's DNA but am not my father.

How did this all get going? Well, if you're interested, there's nothing I can tell you about the history of this movement you can't google. I recommend this book that will take you from the Origins in Origen through Arius and Servetus through Socinus. And if you take that scholastic high road you might conclude that intellectual problems posed by the Cx trinity are all onlywhat UU history is about.

But having mentioned that high road, I don't intend to take it because I find it does not touch the heart so much as what motivates the post Cx UUism: the impulse to Freedom of Religion.

For all intents and purposes we can trace our defining moment back to a single event: the Edict of Torda. You will find a copy of this painting in just about every UU church. A political doctrine in the eastern Hungary principalities by King Sigismund on the advice of his Bishop, the Unitarian (non-trinitarian) Francis David. Here's the pith of what the decree was.

What this means is a freedom FROM and freedom TO, and was an important moment in religious tolerance at a time when the world was anything BUT. It was a brief, shining period that lasted about 25 years—but you can't kill a good idea.

And this notion of freedom seemed to be inherent in any concept of what God or divinity might be, had a scriptural basis. To all our precious personal pieties,

Freedom as an aspect of God gives us a clarifying smack of humility upside our heads. For let us confess that religious freedom is something WE share--

This is not to say UUs have triumphed over Cx because we've made a fetish of freedom. Let us confess...

The future of freedom of religion is religious pluralism. This is more than a recognition of diversity—just says that there are differences, Duh. Pluralism is an ethos--about how we live with those differences. But unfortunately there are a lot of fuzzy thinking around religious pluralism, even in UU circles: 'they all have a piece of the truth', 'they're all different ways of saying the same things', etc. There are better ways of thinking about it...

For none thing, we're often accused of cherry picking among world religions (little rabbinic wisdom, little Tao, little Buddha, little JC is social justice). But then everyone does this to one degree or other. 12 step approach—take what you need and leave the rest. BUT—privileged white western approach, colonialism, taking things out of cultural context, consumer model to get the 'best stuff' just right for Goldilocks. EG—smoking the church is cultural appropriation.

And pluralism is not like a spectrum of value-equal partialities. Tempting to see God and the world in this dualism—pure white light refracting in space and time. But we do NOT stand above it, but among one. Does not disappear real differences. Plus allows 'closer to white' battles.

A better way to look at religious pluralism is the way you look at family resemblance. (Cobb) There are real differences and real sameness. Neither the difference nor the sameness is more important, and there's no hierarchy of value-- Gran is not 'worth more' than junior.

Is UUism, post-Cx, and the pluralism freedom predicates 'syncretism'? A dirty world which assumes there's one pure tonic that must not be added to, blended, combined. Nothing is immune to cultural change, adaptation, hybridization. To the purist any outside addition to the TRUTH means dilution and is dangerous. To us, adding things means increase and convergence. This can be the only eschaton—continual evolution, greater complexity, greater convergence, new living forms. Something like the nature of God?

So our approach does raise a few challenges for those identifying as progressive Cx.

Think of it this way—this year the Reformation is only 500 years old. A blink in the eye of human history. I'm not sure who said it was over and done. May reform continue.

To conclude: the post-Christian is not a matter of doubt, but a matter of faith that more will be revealed, that revelation is continuous and continuing.

Which brings me back to idea I began with: we are not enemies trying to vanquish each other. Nor are we competitors in a shrinking global market. We are family, brother and sisters in arms against a sea of troubles. Which we can meet with the same deep values. Sure, we inflect and express those values differently, but deep down we all recognise that there is more going on than our tiny separate experiences can compass. Something to do with connectedness and meaning and the search for those. And as I said at the outset, the post Christian is not anti-religious, not about excluding Cx or indeed ANYone, but about religion in the deepest sense of the word—to bind together, to re-member, again that which has become sundered and dis-membered. We are all members of one vast family of faith after all.

Thank you.