

# Foundation Address



Address to the inaugural meeting of  
The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought

The Church of St James Education Centre

Curtin, Australian Capital Territory

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By Reverend Rex A E Hunt



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Just recently I went to a section of my personal library and pulled out a copy of Henry Nelson Wieman's book, *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth*.

I was first introduced to Wieman's thought when I was a theological student back in the mid 1960s—by another student. His thought very quickly became part of my life. And despite several house-moves over the years since then, I have resisted the temptation to sell off his books because they are 'old' and now rather dated.

Wieman is a former professor from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, in the USA, and this book, his second one, was published in 1927—which is just a little before my time!

In the opening chapter, Wieman says:

*With respect to religion there are three classes of people: the religious rationalizers, the irreligious rationalizers and the religiously inquisitive.*

*The first class may think about religion from the outside to defend it; the second class may think about it from the outside to destroy it.*

*But only the third class thinks about it from the inside with a view to discovering precisely what may be the good of it. It alone honestly inquires into its validity, its conditions and consequences...*

*(Wieman, 1927, p. 35).*

Seeking to explain his comments a bit more, Wieman goes on to describe, in general terms, each class or group.

The first group, the religious rationalizers, are generally very devout and earnest people. They acquired their religion in childhood or youth, or in some profound experience later in life, and it is a very precious thing. But it is complete and finished. They have nothing more to learn about it. They have only to enjoy it and use it.

All their religious discussions are not forms of inquiry but devices for stimulating further experiences. They want the experience and yearn for more and more of it and are eager to transmit it deeply and widely to others as self-authenticating truths requiring uncritical assent. The ultimate worth and significance of their religion is never a matter of inquiry. Anything that has the hint of intellectual investigation about it and which is then applied to their religion, they bitterly resent.

The second group, the irreligious rationalizers, also refuse to enter into any form of inquiry. Some of them studied it, in Sunday or boarding school, but it was presented in such a way they became sick and tired of it. For them it is a frightful bore, a foolish superstition, an evil influence.

They have no understanding of it. They have made up their minds they want nothing to do with it. They are unable to listen and resent being forced to give the matter any further consideration whatsoever.

On the other hand, the third group, the religiously inquisitive, are intellectually alive. They do not think merely in order to defend. They think in order to understand. Wieman says: Religion may be no less precious to them than to the first group, but for them the most precious things are subjects for investigation.

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(ibid., p. 37).

And again—and please excuse the non inclusive language:

*... the first class, the devout and unthinking, have been the happiest, strongest and most effective of religious folk... For as soon as a man begins to think about anything, it begins to change for him. It takes on diverse shapes and hues. It swims about like a fish in the sea. Only if he refuses to think about his religion... can it remain unchanged like sardines in a can.*

*But the man who thinks about his religion will not find it always the same. Like fish in the stream it not only changes but it may come and go... It is plain that he must live a much more adventurous life of the spirit than do the devoutly unthinking.*

(ibid., pp. 37-38).

While I do not wish to paint a hard-and-fast rule here, I do feel the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought fits more comfortably into the third group or class than either the first or second group. So welcome to the more adventurous life!

As I indicated earlier, it was Wieman's thinking which first launched me on my thirty-year-plus journey in the adventurous life. Since then others have been mentors on the way: John Robinson, Bernard Meland, John Cobb, Bill Dean, and over the last eight to ten years or so, to greater or lesser extent: Matthew Fox, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, John Hick, John Shea, Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg, Jack Spong and Jerome Stone.

I know some of these names will be familiar because some of you have already told me of your own personal journey, and the names of those with whom you have journeyed. Other names will not be familiar at all. That does not matter. What matters is that all of us wish to be nurtured in more authentic and progressive theologies, and are often seeking a safe environment and caring companions with whom to share this more adventurous life!

For those who have already commenced this adventurous life, Richard Grigg's comment will not be new:

*Faithfulness to a tradition is not achieved... by continually reproducing the same formulations over and over again without change... Rather, a tradition's adherents must constantly reinterpret the tradition's teachings so that what they meant in the past can still be heard and understood in a new setting.*

(Grigg, 1995, p. 28).

The Centre was conceived in April this year when the then Church Council at St James saw a need and agreed to establish it. Prior to that decision a group of about twelve to fifteen people from St James, in common with a couple of other congregations close by, had formed a theological discussion group called 'Against the Stream', which has or is discussing, several books by such authors as David Tacey, Jack Spong and Marcus Borg. Tonight we seek to give birth to the April idea.

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While initiative for the Centre has come from within the Uniting Church experience, it is not just a Uniting Church Centre. It is a Centre open to any and to all who wish to explore a more progressive and open theology, in a safe environment. As its Mission Statement suggests, the Centre will:

- Reach out to those for whom organised religion has proved ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive;
- Build a network of support for like-minded people who seek to discover and live by a progressive faith, sharing ideas and pursuing questions and answers;
- Create an open and welcoming community that does not assume the absolute superiority of Christianity, encouraging dialogue with people of other faiths;
- Promote progressive religious thought as an agent of change and renewal in the church; and
- Link with other groups and centres of progressive religious thought.

The Centre is to be guided by a Management Team of seven persons, four of whom—Christine Marshall Cox, Jeanne Hugoe-Matthews, John Robbins and myself—have already been nominated by St James. The intention is that we will be able to find three other people willing to join the Management Team from this gathering tonight. And generally we hope people will consider joining the Centre through a system of membership fees—both individually and group. Such funds, along with any donations supporters are prepared to give, will help to administer the Centre as well as meet some of the expenses related to visiting guests and activities. The Centre will be a non-profit organisation

The Centre will run parallel to the Church of St James. I say that so as to underscore the point that you don't have to be a member of, or join, the congregation here at St James to be part of the Centre. But the Church Council at St James will continue to take an active interest in the Centre, receive reports on its activity, and seek to support its life in various ways.

And in answer to the question already asked by some of you: a progressive theology does tend to shape the preaching, the liturgies and the mission of the Church of St James. Opportunities to receive copies of some of those sermons, in either printed or e-mail form, are available to those who would like to pursue that inquiry further.

Since announcing the decision to establish the Centre we have received many enquiries from folk, such as yourselves, who are either already in a theological discussion group or meditation group, or have read a book advocating a more progressive theological understanding—usually a book or article by Jack Spong, or have left a conservative or fundamentalist congregation and looking for a new, safe place to explore a more progressive faith.

In this sense each of us has commenced the journey. The question which remains is: where to from here? Well, let me go back to the Centre's Mission Statement and offer some suggestions.

- **Link with other groups**

The Centre hopes to be able to link with existing groups—especially those in Canberra and district. It does not want to takeover any group. It wants to encourage existing groups to continue and flourish if that is what they want to do.

For those folk who are not a member of an existing discussion group then they might like to join a group here at St James or other such group elsewhere. What is important is that the small group discussions are known about and continue. But it is also important that all these small groups can come together from time to time and share in some events, which would be organised by the Centre. One such event, for

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instance, was the recent successful co-sponsoring between the Centre and Against the Stream of one of the Canberra workshops by theologian Michael Morwood.

And two other events already in the development stage, are:

- (i) An introductory discussion over two nights in October on Dom Crossan's book *The Birth of Christianity* by the associate minister here at St James, Gregor Henderson. Gregor studied with Crossan back in the late 1960s
- (ii) As recent as this afternoon, I have shared in discussions at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture with a group of other local folk in helping to shape the October 2003 visit to Canberra by Jack Spong.

Another role which the Centre is developing is the listing of web sites and groups, both here and overseas, where progressive religious thought is encouraged. Some of those groups include: Process and Faith, Sea of Faith, The Centre for Progressive Christianity, Faith Futures Foundation, Jesus Seminar, Christianity of the Third Millennium and Centre for Spiritual Development. I hope we can also develop a web site where we can have direct links to these and the many other groups not mentioned, and they with us.

A list of available printed resources is also being developed. A sample listing is available tonight. This particular list is far from complete, lists only books from within progressive Christian thought, and is made available both as a bit of a guide as to what is out there, but also so others ~ you ~ can offer the names of additional resources you have studied or found helpful on your journey. The list needs to be expanded and continually made available.

- **Promote progressive religious thought**

The current theological climate in many of the churches today indicates to me and no doubt to many of you, that the notion of God is in desperate need of transformation. But we don't have to always reinvent the theological wheel. The wheel is already here and turning. What needs to be done is for the stories to be told. The Centre would take a lead role in that storytelling.

It would also work to offer some bigger picture opportunities such as inviting creative thinkers to share their understanding of such theological trends as Liberation, Feminist, Process, Narrative and Australian contextual theologies and praxis, for example—taking these thoughts out of the hands of the so-called experts and making the benefits of such thinking available to any interested person. As John Cobb, process theologian, reminds us, 'laypeople are just as capable of hard intellectual work as are professional theologians.' (Cobb, 1995, p. 7).

- **Create an open community... which encourages dialogue with people of other faiths**

Again, this already has had fledging beginnings in the wider community, as evidenced by the courses and discussions at U3A led by Kevin Walcott and, as I understand it, in the interests presently being pursued by Ivor Vivian at the Liberal Catholic parish. But seldom do the so-called mainline/old-line grass roots congregations share in this open dialogue. Too often it belongs to the rarified heights of national church leaders, or is only considered locally as an opportunity for so-called evangelism.

The Centre would encourage, support and facilitate such openness and sharing, by bringing together people of several faiths, so all can learn from and listen to, each other ~ thereby helping to develop trust and genuine friendship.

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- **Build a network of support**

I believe that building commences tonight. Between all of us. And between those whom you will introduce to your various groups and to the Centre.

- **Reach out to those Spong calls ‘exiles’**

Some of those exiles are here tonight. If you did not know it already, may you know that as from tonight you need not be alone on your journey. On the second last page of his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Jack Spong declares, ‘I write to call those who are in exile from the ancient understandings of faith into some new possibilities’ (Spong, 1998, p. 227).

If the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought at St James can also assist in that call by becoming a place which both encourages progressive religious thinking and how to do that theological thinking, in contrast to a tendency which often requires a theology to be built on what should be believed, then I feel it will have been fertile soil in the rebirthing of a new awareness of divinity.

— Rex Hunt.



## Books Mentioned

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| Cobb, J. B.<br>1993   | <i>Becoming A Thinking Christian.</i><br>TEN: Nashville. Abingdon.  |
| Grigg, R.<br>1995     | <i>When God Becomes Goddess. The Transformation Of American Religion.</i> NY: New York. Continuum Publishing.   |
| Spong, J. S.<br>1998  | <i>Why Christianity Must Change or Die. A bishop speaks to believers in exile.</i> NY: New York. HarperCollins. |
| Wieman, H. N.<br>1927 | <i>The Wrestle of Religion with Truth.</i><br>NY: New York. Macmillan Co.                                       |