

# The Past, Pleasures and Prospects of Liberal Christianity

Professor Marion Maddox

(address to Anglicans Together, 2 September, 2016)

It's very nice of you to invite me to Anglicans Together: you are evidently *very* Together, even to the extent of being Together with me, though I am not an Anglican. Though, without wanting to leave my home tradition, which is the Uniting Church, I have always had a sort of secret Anglican envy, and for patches of years, first in the Adelaide Hills and in Wellington NZ, I have been lucky enough to be a hanger-on of wonderful Anglican parishes. So it's lovely to be with you.

Lately I have been poking about in the nineteenth century, particularly of Australia and France, as part of my research, which is about religion-state relations; and the more I read about what dominated public debate 130, 140, 150 years ago, the more inspired I feel by re-encountering the ways some liberal Christians from back then thought about the important questions that faced them, and still face us.

So I thought that tonight I would like to share with you some of what I have learned, and why I found them so inspiring.

First, a little about my background. I was brought up as a Methodist, until the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977 and, probably like most of us when we are children, assumed without really thinking about it that most people probably believed in much the same way I did. The first time I really became aware that other people didn't think about religion the same way that my family and I did was in Year 5, when my class began a science and social science program, imported from America, called MACOS, which stood for Man: A Course of Study.

MACOS was a year-long program examining life-cycles and integration between social and natural systems. We started with the lifecycle of the Pacific Coast salmon, from hatching (in vivid colour film that the teacher had to set up in the classroom) out to sea and back to the salmon's final, exhausting, upstream return journey to breed and die in the pools where they had hatched. Then we, along with students around Australia, New Zealand, the US, UK, and Canada, progressed to the life-cycle of the herring-gull, with their memorable feeding technique that, incidentally, introduced 10-year-olds across the nation to the useful new word

‘regurgitate’. Then came the baboon, officially to teach us about social behaviour in the baboon troop, though we were mainly transfixed by the animals’ hot-pink, leathery, hairless buttocks—another triumph of classroom film. And so on, through the species, until, right at the end of the year, we finally got to humans, meeting the Netsilik Inuit, whom we watched slaughter seals on the ice and face various life-and-death dilemmas unlikely to face children in suburban Sydney.

Wondering at the tenacity of the Pacific Salmon, I was almost equally amazed by a teacher calling me aside with an instruction to tell my parents that they had the right to exclude me from the classes if they wished. Who would object to films of vomiting seagulls and pink-bottomed baboons? I had no idea that the program was the centre of a storm in the United States, where religious activists denounced it for promoting ‘sex education, evolution, hippie-yippie philosophy, pornography, gun-control and communism’, and that these ructions were just starting to be felt in Australia, eventually leading to the program’s banning in Queensland. The teacher must have been nervous about having a clergyman’s daughter in the class; and I, though uncomprehending, dutifully passed on the message.

It turned out my parents did have reservations about *Man: A Course of Study*, and were a little surprised I needed to have them pointed out. My mother, a biologist, was impressed by the program’s evolutionary approach; my father, a Methodist minister and New Testament scholar, was pleased to find us discussing challenging moral problems; but both were disturbed that, with the daily headlines full of campaigns for equal pay and ‘women’s lib’, a supposedly progressive program could use ‘Man’ in the title as if it referred to everyone. My father frowned that ‘HACOS’ (for *Humans: A Course of Study*) would be more appropriate, or perhaps ‘PACOS’ (*People ...*); but I stayed in the class.

One of the program’s features that eventually saw it thrown off the Queensland curriculum, by personal fiat of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, was its emphasis on evolution. But as a Year 5 student, I don’t think it had occurred to me that anyone would think of the origins of life in any other way. I do remember a fellow-student saying to me, after a lesson the big bang, ‘But I thought God made the world’, and me replying, in genuine puzzlement at where the problem could possibly lie, ‘Well, of course, but this is *how* God did it.’ Until I encountered them at university, I never knowingly met a creationist. I would certainly have been shocked to have found one at the church we attended at least weekly (as the gadabout teen years arrived, I

added evening services on Sundays and Friday evening youth group to the staid Sunday mornings). Church was where you learned about global inequality and social justice, and celebrated important annual festivals, painting banners for the Palm Sunday peace marches. We also spent a lot of time studying the Bible, which we took very seriously—but I never expected anyone would take it all literally.

This was the tradition in which I grew up, and which took me through university in the Student Christian Movement and through theological study at United Theological College and the Adelaide College of Divinity. It is a position perhaps similar to that at which some people arrive after considerable struggle, casting off more authoritarian kinds of theology that impose strict hierarchies in areas like gender, sexuality and, perhaps less obviously, race and class, and that rest on what Keith Mascord calls the ‘lure of literalism’ and the ‘error of inerrancy’<sup>1</sup>. I was lucky enough not to have to make the painful journey that Keith and many others describe so beautifully in books about the journey out of fundamentalism. Instead, I was nurtured from the beginning in the tradition that is generally, if loosely, called ‘liberal’.

Originally, ‘liberal theology’ referred to the 18<sup>th</sup> century move initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher that privileged individual, interior spiritual experience as the primary source of theological insight. Over the nineteenth century, it came to mean especially being willing to bring the techniques of scholarship—historical, sociological, archaeological, literary, linguistic and so on—to bear on religious questions. Around the turn of the twentieth century, it acquired a further dimension, of the so-called ‘social gospel’, most famously developed by American Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. In *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), he spelled out a vision of Christian responsibility to work towards social conditions that enable people to be their best selves, and against the conditions that abuse, exploit and dehumanise. In *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), Rauschenbusch articulated the idea of sin as having a ‘super-personal’ dimension in the forces beyond individuals such as nationalism, capitalism and militarism.

For some time now, this liberal theological tradition has been taking a battering, and from various sides. In 1970, Dean Kelley, an American sociologist and himself a liberal Protestant, an office-bearer with the National Council of Churches, published the highly-influential *Why*

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith Mascord, *Faith Without Fear: Risky Choices Facing Contemporary Christians* Melbourne: Morning Star Publications 2016

*Conservative Churches are Growing*. He argued that liberal churches were losing members because they had become too preoccupied with social and political causes, too questioning in their approach to dogma and too undemanding on their members in terms of personal morality. Conservative churches were raking in their members, he found, by sticking with theological certainties, demanding hard commitments in their members' personal lives and keeping clear of (overt) politics. So influential was Kelley's analysis that similar arguments were still being mounted forty years later, by voices as diverse as theologian Alister McGrath in *The Future of Christianity* (2002) and *The Twilight of Atheism* (2004) and sociologist Rodney Stark, who is still arguing in 2016 that churches die when they concern themselves with social justice and thrive when they try to constrain their members with authoritarian dogma and conservative personal morality.

I would like to say three things, just quickly, about this argument. First, although it is true that conservative churches are larger than liberal ones, in Australia as well as in the US, Kelley's original, empirical claims about why have been strenuously challenged. Sociologist of religion Mark Chaves<sup>2</sup> found five factors driving the relative growth (that should really be 'slower decline') of conservative churches and faster decline of liberal ones, none of them to do with people flocking out of liberal churches into conservative ones in search of more stringent dogma and discipline.

Second, even if one were to accept the premise about the reasons churches grow or shrink, it does not necessarily follow that churches should do anything that brings about growth. I do not recall Jesus saying, 'Go out into the world and make disciples at any cost—just do whatever it takes to get bums on seats.' Yet this is the use to which Kelley's, and subsequent versions of the argument, are often put.

Third, even if one were to accept that church growth—'bums on seats'—were somehow an end in itself, which is what the Kelley-McGrath-Stark argument seems to imply, I don't see how to avoid the realisation that the lure of literalism and the error of inerrancy have also driven many people *off* church pews—not merely away, but sometimes limping, sometimes raging at the suffering inflicted on them *by the church* that was supposed to be showing love. Statistics that say 'Look—this conservative church is growing!' show the people inside it, but they don't show the women who stayed too long with abusive partners because their literalist church told them

---

<sup>2</sup> *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* Princeton University Press 2011

marriage is for life and the man is the head of the woman; or the queer teenager told over and over again that the image of God got somehow warped on its way into him or her; or the person told that their disabilities are God's will (or punishment) and would disappear if they only prayed hard enough; or the questioners told to keep their questions to themselves. But those are not hypothetical examples: all of them have been told to people very close to me, quite recently. However vital the imperative for bums on seats or souls in the spotlight, surely churches, no less than anyone else, should heed the instruction, 'first do no harm'.

The liberal tradition has also recently come under fire from another quarter, namely, from a particular branch of the academic discipline of religious studies. Some practitioners of religious studies—which is my discipline, so I feel this one—argue that liberal Christianity's quest for understanding and mutuality leads to a false universalising, glossing over real and important differences. One such critic is the distinguished scholar of religion, Russell McCutcheon, who warns against the 'fevered efforts to find commonality amidst diversity' that can lead us to 'construct abstract images of sameness that overlook, ignore, and sometimes deny and belittle the very concrete ways in which human communities continually divide and distinguish among themselves, ways that are themselves some of the primary strategies that bring about severe material and social imbalances.'<sup>3</sup>

In other words, one can get so carried away with the urge to be inclusive (and I once had the job title of Director for the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion) that we can forget that not everyone might actually *want* to be included in whatever it is that we think is so wonderful. They may, in fact, think it needs a good, hard shake up, or overthrowing altogether, rather than greater tolerance, pluralism or a bit more magnanimous inclusion. Theologising can be a way of avoiding such hard realities. McCutcheon again:

Because tolerance is a virtue of the powerful, there is always something very real at stake in deciding just what to tolerate, in deciding the practical limits of the public square's seemingly endless boundaries ... Religious pluralist/tolerance discourses ... lend the guise of resolution on the spiritual level to what cannot be resolved so easily in the material, historical world.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* State University of New York 2001, 54-55

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-5

Nevertheless, amid all these buffets from both right and left, when Andrew's invitation to me to speak arrived, I was in the midst of falling in love all over again with the liberal theological tradition. I think that McCutcheon's criticisms are quite valid: glossing over differences in search of an easy, fake unity rather than paying attention to hard questions of real inequality is a problem to which liberals (and not only liberal Christians) are rather prone.

That is why I found it so refreshing, and inspiring, to delve back into the work of some very early contributors to the tradition—because they tried hard to avoid those pitfalls, while addressing some surprisingly modern-sounding problems.

I have time tonight to introduce you to just one of my new nineteenth-century friends, and I hope give you a glimpse of why it can be so worthwhile revisiting our roots. Last Tuesday week, a woman on a beach near Nice in France was given a fine and an infringement notice, and what she had infringed, according to the ticket, was 'good morals and *laïcité*'<sup>5</sup>. How did she do that? By wearing too many clothes. We could talk all night about that particular case; but for now, that word: *laïcité*. It means the combination of religious freedom and religion-state separation. Although often talked about as though it were a timeless Republican value, the word, *laïcité*, was invented at the end of the nineteenth century, by an education bureaucrat called Ferdinand Buisson.

Buisson was born in Paris in 1841 into a Protestant family. In 1865 he wrote *Le Christianisme Libéral*, the first exposition of what he would later sum up as his aspiration for a universal religion 'without dogma, without miracles, without priests'.<sup>6</sup>

In 1866, he went into voluntary exile in Switzerland rather than swear allegiance to the Second Empire. In Switzerland, he found a community of French radicals, who, like him, were liberal Protestants and, in the split then underway between liberals and evangelicals, aligned himself with a liberalism that aimed to transcend denomination or dogma, aspiring to become a universal religion of humanity.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ben Quinn, 'French police make woman remove clothing on Nice beach following burkini ban', *Guardian* 24 August 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/french-police-make-woman-remove-burkini-on-nice-beach>

<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand Buisson, eulogy for Jules Steeg, quoted in Laurence Loeffel, *La morale à l'école selon Ferdinand Buisson*, Paris: Éditions Tallandier 2013

He began work on a thesis on Sébastien Castellion, a sixteenth-century theologian of the French Reformation who, contrary to the common image of stern reformers ever ready to wield the axe or the faggot on a whiff of heresy, maintained that love was more important than doctrinal purity.

He tried, while in Switzerland, to found a liberal church, which he imagined as a new national religion for France.<sup>7</sup> Given the conservative Catholicism back home, you'd have to say he was an optimist.

But the anti-institutional faith of Buisson and his friends was too radical for the church. Failing to institutionalise republican values through a new national church, they instead put their energies into developing France's secular school system as, says French educational historian Laurence Loeffel, 'the vector of diffusion *par excellence* of their moral and spiritual ideal.' First as Director of Paris's public schools, then as professor of education at the Sorbonne, and finally as a Radical-Socialist member of Parliament, he advocated *laïcité*, but of a decidedly spiritual kind. He regarded himself as a 'free-thinker', but denounced what he called the 'grouping of fanatics' whose 'burning profession of faith in atheism' denied them the right 'to call themselves either free or thinkers.' Buisson maintained that the true religion, which could be shared by believers and atheists alike, was the human striving towards what he called the 'tritych' of 'the True, the Beautiful and the Good.'

In 1898, Buisson co-founded the League of Human Rights (la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme), of which he was President for thirteen years. If you have been following the ructions on France's beaches, you might possibly recognise the name of the League of Human Rights, because it was one of the organisations that took the case I mentioned to the Conseil d'État that, last Tuesday week, overturned the regulation, and by extension some thirty other local regulations like it, under which the woman was fined for wearing Muslim dress on the beach.<sup>8</sup>

In 1905, he chaired the parliamentary committee, incidentally with a number of other prominent liberal Protestant members, that drafted the Law for Separating the Churches and the State.

---

<sup>7</sup> Laurence Loeffel, *La morale à l'école selon Ferdinand Buisson* Paris: Éditions Tallandier 2013, 47

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, 'Top court suspends France's burkini ban', 26 August 2016, <http://www.news.com.au/world/breaking-news/top-court-suspends-frances-burkini-ban/news-story/c4f0aad4cb612bf846b546f5a1bba9f3>

Buisson's spiritual version of *laïcité*, based, as described in his *Manifesto for Liberal Christianity*, on a 'cult of the good and love of humanity', repeatedly warned against the sort of secularism that imposes itself in a hard-line suppression of other people's beliefs or practices.

He walked a fine line, because, as Director of Paris's public schools, he was part of the wave of radical-socialist Republicans who oversaw the end of education delivered through religious orders, and the beginning of France's system of free, compulsory and secular public schools. And he was the editor of a massive educational resource, the *Dictionary of Pedagogy*, that appeared in two editions, in 1887 and 1911, that recognises Australia as a forerunner in that field.

In Australia and also, at least in the case of Buisson and his fellow-Protestant educationalists, in France, secular education was not born mainly out of an anti-religious impulse. The founders of free, compulsory and secular education did not reach conclusions they did because they hated religion, or wanted a Godless society, or believed that education should be value-free. On the contrary, they thought that the segregated religious schools that preceded universal public education were damaging their societies' social cohesion by dividing their children on religious lines, and damaging their democratic and economic prospects by restricting education to those who could pay. In parliament after parliament, they warned that public money should not teach children that some are better than others, deserve more than others or have a better chance of haven than others. They maintained that their societies deserved nothing less than for all their children to enjoy the best education, side by side, and to grow up knowing that their destinies were bound together.

In McCutcheon's terms, public education was trying to solve a problem 'in the material, historical world', namely, children's need to acquire education, whether or not their parents could afford it.

From the 1970s, and with increasing pace from the 1990s, we have been racing in the opposite direction, back to schools demarcated on religious lines and education stratified by how much parents can pay. We now have one of the most stratified school systems in the world, with schools whose yearly fees exceed a third of median household income for one student. Yet they still receive substantial public subsidies and tax breaks, while the public schools that welcome the most disadvantaged and most difficult to teach have gone steadily backwards in their share of funding. When challenged, this increasing inequality is regularly defended on the grounds of

parents' right to 'religious freedom'—to choose a religious education. But it is exactly the situation our liberal, Christian forebears worked so hard to avoid. Before we careen any further down that path, we might want to pause to remember what moved them to decide as they did.

Perhaps, instead of Ferdinand Buisson, I should have introduced you to some of my Australian nineteenth-century friends, like George Higinbotham, Victoria's Attorney-General and then Chief Justice, an Anglican who devoted a great deal of his Parliamentary career to ensuring that Victoria's public school curriculum did not discriminate against, or exclude, the children of any religion, and spent his last day in Parliament drawing attention to text book content that offended Jewish families. You can read about him, and many other liberal Christian innovators, Catholic and Protestant, as well as some Jewish ones, in my recent book, *Taking God to School: The End of Australia's Egalitarian Education?*<sup>9</sup> And I understand another author is here who has a new book that can introduce us to some more eirenic, liberal nineteenth century friends: I have just become aware today of John Bunyan's *Beauty and Truth: Reflections and 24 Songs for a Reasonable Reformation*.

---

<sup>9</sup> Sydney: Allen & Unwin 2014