

**Address given to the Auckland Sea of Faith  
By Clay Nelson  
21 June 2015**

***The Past, Present and Future of Progressive Religion in Aotearoa New Zealand***

I want to thank Marion for inviting me to share this time with you. While I have looked forward to being with you, I wish I had reflected longer before offering the topic: *The Past, Present and Future of Progressive Religion in Aotearoa New Zealand*. You invited me for one 30 to 40 minute talk, not a six-part series of lectures. So I have struggled with how to slice this topic so it is thin enough to permit light to shine through it.

The aim of the Sea of Faith has offered me a way forward. Your stated aim is “to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation.” While you aim at a large target, it reminds me that one’s faith is a personal creation. I can only speak to tonight’s topic from what I have experienced along my own path—a path that never went where I thought it was going or intended to be—which may be true of this talk as well.

When I was baptised at the age of five by a priest who was steeped in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of bells and smells I never thought I’d end up a priest who twice has had delegations go to the bishop to demand I be tried for heresy. Of course that priest probably never expected his daughter, a Sunday school classmate of mine, to be one of the eleven illegally ordained women into the Episcopal priesthood. Making her amongst the very first to be a woman priest.

When I look back, my progressive religious views are not entirely of my own making. They are rooted in my DNA. My father was a scientist. He was so committed to empiricism that he had an acronym for the scientific method as the vanity plate on his car and yet he was a lay leader in every church we attended while I grew up. My mother was the family sceptic, never accepting anything on its face value. Fads were folly to her. Going her “own way” was much preferable to following the crowd. Nor was she shy about expressing her views, no matter how embarrassing they were to her teen-age son. Yet, she was recruited to be the church treasurer wherever we attended worship, which we did weekly.

So from the very beginning reason and faith swaddled me. My mother’s milk was to question everything. No wonder I grew up finding nourishment only in the next question, not past answers. I believe that seeking the next question is at the heart of progressive religion. It seemed obvious to me that the Westar Institute, home of the Jesus Seminar, would name their DVD course on Progressive Christianity, *Living the Questions*.

So my first question tonight is what progressive religious views are found in Aotearoa New Zealand’s DNA? By the time Samuel Marsden preached his Christmas Day sermon near the Bay of Islands 200 years ago, a year before the first pakeha child was born in 1816, a lot of groundwork for progressive religion had already been laid during Europe’s Enlightenment thanks to John Locke, David Hume and others. Not that Marsden was aware of it. Known as the “flogging parson” in Australia where he beat religion into or, more probably, out of convicts, he is unlikely to have contributed

much in the way of progressive genetic material to religion in Aotearoa New Zealand. The early missionaries who accompanied English colonialism may have had the best of intentions for the welfare of Maori, but the muskets they introduced were hardly helpful. Their evangelical zeal for spreading the Gospel was a far cry from progressive thought. They were selling answers not questions. They were about building a kingdom that was synonymous with the institutional church and British colonial aims.

The first glimmer of a progressive gene was at Waitangi where the idea of religious tolerance was introduced, including for Maori spirituality. While it was only achieved on paper, it was a start. Before the ink was dry, intolerance raised its head when the Anglicans refused to follow the Catholics in the procession to sign the treaty.

The bulk of settlers who arrived in Nelson in 1842 were, of course, members of the Church of England, who would later make up the parliament that would try to pressure the first Anglican bishop, George Selwyn, to make Anglicanism the state religion. In a brief flare-up of progressivism he refused, believing that being the state religion back in England had not done the church any good. When parliament offered all the existing Christian religions support through taxes, they refused, not because of an enlightened belief in the separation of church and state, but because they did not want money from heretics and nonbelievers. Yes, some of them found their way to the colony, England not being a comfortable place for non-conformists. And it may be from them that most of our progressive DNA is located.

Amongst them were Unitarians who contributed their progressive values early on to our young nation. Let me tell you a little about Unitarians. They are a contrary lot who are less than impressed with clerical authority, allergic to creeds and dogma, partial to unbridled democracy—the more chaotic and inclusive the better, passionate about social justice and the environment, lovers of a good argument even for its own sake, and advocates for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning--cost what it may, lead where it will. They have a high tolerance for religious diversity, happily including humanists and rationalists into their fold. If they are suspicious of anyone, it is Christians. It probably goes back to their grudge with John Calvin, who burned Michael Servetus at the stake for arguing against the Doctrine of the Trinity and refusing to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus.

By the time Hobson was appointed New Zealand's first Governor in 1840, the early Unitarians and later the Transcendentalists in America had already laid the foundation for what we would now consider progressive religion. William Ellery Channing using the biblical criticism coming out of Germany made an argument for a rational Christianity in 1813. His major point was offering a positive vision of humanity. His heretical view of humanity flew in the face of prevailing Calvinist doctrine that preached about our fundamental depravity, original sin, and the need for salvation by atonement—or else!

In 1838 a recent graduate was invited to address the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School. In his address Ralph Waldo Emerson laid the next foundation stone in progressive religion. He denied the miracles of Jesus as a basis for Jesus' credibility. He also argued that a purely rational religion left it "corpse-cold" and denied a spirituality that undergirded the physical realm. He saw God in all and all in

God. He heard better sermons in nature than in church. He also argued that each of us was able to reach religious truth intuitively.

It was a very radical suggestion, that every person could develop a personal intuition of the divine without considering church authority. It promoted new faith in the individual's ability to reason—a reason not in contrast to feelings of the heart, but in contrast to external authority that was often unreasonable. And this is the essence of Transcendentalism, really: that pure religion transcends any particular church doctrine, and individuals can intuitively seek their own original and direct connection with the divine.

The key foundation stone to progressive religion came three years after Emerson shook up the religious establishment. Theodore Parker presented an even more controversial thrust into heresy. His sermon called “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity” was delivered at an ordination. Parker carried the Transcendentalist position one giant step farther than Emerson, who was content to elaborate mostly in abstractions. Parker got specific, using logic encouraged by the freethinking Transcendentalist Club. What was permanent, he declared, was the pure religion taught by Jesus: the values, the morality, the love.

And what were clearly transient were the varying forms and doctrines that Christianity had taken on over the centuries. He then declared that because interpretations of the Bible have changed, it is not to be trusted. In fact, worship of it is idolatry. Further, since understandings of Jesus' authority have also changed, he, too, is not essential to one's “instinctive intuition of the divine,” proposed by Transcendentalism. Jesus was, maybe not irrelevant, but certainly a transient and not permanent feature in the understanding of pure religion.

That Jesus was not essential incensed religious authorities and one group of his disapproving Unitarian colleagues demanded he resign his ministry. He didn't oblige, going on to become one of America's most popular preachers.

All of these progressive ideas had already permeated the thinking of the Unitarians who were among the first New Zealand settlers. While the Rev Franklin Bradley did not begin the first Unitarian congregation in New Zealand, here in Auckland, until 1863, Unitarians like Premier and later Chief Justice Robert Stout had been in the eyes of traditional Christians fomenting them from the time of their arrival in the early 1840s.

Stout was a larger than life individual, and so, to describe his contribution to New Zealand in a few words is a disservice. But to give a taste of how his progressive religious views made a difference let me highlight a few. Like any good Unitarian he enjoyed debate about all matters but especially about religion. He said of his early family life, “Theological disputation was a part of our social life.” His intellectual gifts and debating skills would eventually bring him to Parliament. There he was an ardent land reformer. He believed the State should intervene in land sales to prevent the development of a powerful landlord class leaving the mass of the population landless. He also advocated what we would now call a capital gains tax on unearned income from land sales. Where is he now when we need him?

He had a reformer's heart. He sought changes to the civil service system to prevent cronyism, patronage and corruption. He strongly supported secondary and technical education. He was the single most influential figure in the development of New Zealand's university system. He was a leader in the fight for women's rights, supporting women's suffrage and property and inheritance rights. He put forth bills to permit women to serve in Parliament.

He was appalled by sweatshops and poverty. While he once opposed state intervention in economic life, he came to believe that state intervention was required to remedy these evils. He did much to bring about labour reform, strengthening unions.

When he left Parliament he was appointed Chief Justice of the High Court where he served for 27 years, presiding over 1400 cases, where he left his progressive stamp.

Stout was a controversial figure but there is no doubt that he was a highly influential architect of a democratic New Zealand.

One of his close friends later in life was William Jellie, my predecessor at the Auckland Unitarian Church, who served as its first minister beginning in 1901. Jellie was steeped in liberal religion and was an ethical socialist who believed that it was an obligation of every Unitarian minister to speak out against inequality and human suffering. Jellie continued to influence religious thinking in New Zealand until his death in 1963.

These and other Unitarians did much to further progressive religious values in New Zealand's religious landscape. But no examination of New Zealand DNA would be complete without acknowledging Sir Lloyd Geering's past and present contribution.

I don't have to say much to this gathering about Lloyd. He has had an intimate relationship with the Sea of Faith since it began. He certainly has had a profound impact on me. His book *Christianity without God* gave me the courage to come out of the closet as a non-theist. But what I want to focus on is his high profile trial for doctrinal error and "disturbing the peace and tranquillity of the Presbyterian Church." His "heresy" was to preach about something that had long been argued by scholars: that the resurrection wasn't literal. Apparently it was news to Presbyterian elders that it didn't happen in the sense that Jesus was resuscitated. While the conservatives failed to make their case, it captured the attention of New Zealanders, many of whom rejected organised religion as a result. I have heard it argued that, more than any other event, his 1967 trial put us on the course of becoming the predominantly secular nation we now are. While Sir Lloyd contributed greatly to our progressive genetic matter through his scholarship and participation in the Jesus Seminar, the church's negative response to him has been a diabolical form of genetic manipulation, removing the religious gene altogether from a large proportion of the general population.

Which brings us to the present plight of progressive religion. There are only a few enclaves where progressive religion can be found within denominations. St Andrews-on-the-Terrace and the Community of St Luke's certainly are two, but they hardly have the support of their co-religionists. St Matthew-in-the-City for about 13 years qualified as a bastion of progressive thought, but sadly no longer. And there is the

Auckland Unitarian Church, a small but hardy group willing to test the boundaries of religion and decidedly rational in their approach. Outside institutional boundaries there is the Sea of Faith. While you will find progressive thinkers within many congregations of differing denominations, I know of no other faith communities who carry the mantle of progressive religion in New Zealand. Which brings me to the crystal ball part of my talk. What do I see the future of progressive religion in Aotearoa New Zealand being?

I have to say my ball is a little cloudy.

I believe the church needs progressive religious values and ideas for its own survival. Henry Emerson Fosdick eloquently said over a hundred years ago, progressives “deliberately, sometimes desperately, work to adapt Christian thought and harmonise it with the intellectual culture of our time... Adaptation is the only way we can save our faith and its achievement is a matter of life and death.”

However, it is a difficult road for us who want the church to survive but know that the institution just wants us to go away. In 1925, Kirsopp Lake, a New Testament scholar, wrote that denominational divisions had lost their relevance and had been replaced by three new streams that divided Protestants into Experimentalists, Institutionalists, and Fundamentalists. He predicted the Fundamentalists would eventually triumph. They will drive out the Experimentalists with the help of the Institutionalists and then reabsorb the Institutionalists who, under pressure, will become more orthodox. The church will shrink from left to right. By 1960 this trend was clearly evident. In NZ today those who might have welcomed a more adaptive Christianity have left. Church attendance is in deep decline except in some conservative congregations, yet Institutionalists think what needs to be done to turn it around is doing what we have always done, but which is what drove away the faithful in the first place. Progressive Christians think that is the definition of insanity.

I offer you this personal statement by a priest in the Church of England with progressive Christian beliefs who was being pressured to conform by his bishop to traditional norms. David Keighley speaks for many who feel compelled to follow this path.

## LEAVING HOME

I'm off!

I must leave the political and ethical compromises that have corrupted the faith of my Jesus.

I must leave the stifling theology, the patriarchal structures.

I must leave the enduring prejudices based on our God-given humanity, the colour of my skin, my gender or how my sexual orientation is practised.

I must leave the mentality that encourages anyone to think that our doctrines are unchangeable.

I must leave the belief of those who insist that our sacred texts are without error.

I must leave the God of miracle and magic.

I must leave the promises of certainty, the illusion of possessing the true faith.

I must leave behind the claims of being the recipient of an unchallengeable revelation.

I must leave the neurotic religious desire to know that I am right, and to play at being

God.

I must leave the claim that every other pathway to God is second-rate, that fellow Hindu searchers in India, Buddhists in China and Tibet, Muslims in the Middle East and the Jews of Israel are inadequate.

I must leave the pathway that tells me that all other directions will get me lost.

I must leave the certain claim that my Jesus is the only way to God for everyone.

I must leave the ultimate act of human folly that says it is.

I must leave the Church, my home.

I must leave behind my familiar creeds and faith-symbols.

I can no longer stay in an unliveable place.

I must move to a place where I can once again sing the Lord's song.

I must move to where my faith-tradition can be revived and live on.

I must move to a place where children don't tell me what I believe is unbelievable but tell me they can believe what I believe.

I must move to a place where they are not playing at moving the deck chairs on the decks of an ecclesiastical Titanic.

I can never leave the God experience.

I can never walk away from the doorway into the divine that I believe I have found in the one I call the Christ and acknowledge as "my Lord."

I must move to dangerous and religiously threatening places.

I must move to where there is no theism, but still God.

I'm off! But to where, God only knows.

Another discouraging trend is in the demographics of those who presently carry the torch for progressive religion. If Sir Lloyd wasn't still soldiering on, most of us would feel old. When I went to the Second Common Dreams conference in Melbourne a few years ago I was heartened by the large number who attended, but most of them had hair colour the same as mine. When I attended a mini version of Common Dreams here at St Luke's almost a year ago it was much the same. To whom will we pass the torch? I really don't know.

All I can do is live in hope that some will be there. If my belief that we are all spiritual beings is correct, we will continue to seek ways to express and nurture that part of who we are. If the old institutions aren't up to the task, they will continue to die and well they should. In a future I can't see I trust that progressive people will create a new religion that is relevant to their worldview. It is in our DNA to do so. It will probably not look anything like what religious institutions do today, but they will be places where faith and reason can coexist as they seek out the next question in our search for truth and meaning. Part of what has drawn me to work with Unitarians is their openness to exploring what a church might look like in the future. The other part that draws me to them is that no matter how small in numbers we may be progressive religious values need to be expressed in New Zealand. Without them we will continue our steady drift to the right. We need to be heard if we are to challenge inequality, poverty, discrimination, destruction of the environment, to mention but a few. New Zealand will be the poorer if we disappear. That is not an option.