

WHAT MIGHT THE VISION OF 21ST CENTURY CHURCH BE IF WE TOOK RADICAL THEOLOGY SERIOUSLY?

Alan Webster

A paper which grew like Topsy

The present paper went through several stages. First, I wrote up “An Alternative Vision Strategy” as my response to a vision strategy paper put out in 2001 by the Stationing Committee. I was invited to present it at a Spirit and Spice seminar. Touchstone subsequently published a letter of endorsement of the paper. I next added summaries of the views of seven radical theologians: Cupitt, Borg, Crossan, Funk, Karen Armstrong, Holloway, and Spong. The expanded paper was placed on the new Spirit and Spice website.

In April 2003, I had the privilege of presenting the expanded paper to the Lower North Island Summer School of Theology of the Methodist Church of New Zealand. In that paper, I began to focus more closely on the vision implications of the separate theologians. (The paper for that presentation is obtainable on request from Dr Alan Webster, 16 Antonio Street, Stratford, New Zealand.)

From the feedback at the School of Theology I saw that it would be useful to integrate the vision implications within one paper, so that it became a more cohesive statement of vision for the future church. The present paper is the result. It does not repeat the summaries of the theologians, as these are included in the initial article on this website. The present paper attempts to integrate the views of the theologians and the implications - in short, what the church might be if radical theology were to be taken as an action vision.

Introduction

At a fundamental level, to be Christian is to be radical. It follows that the expression “radical Christian” is redundant. So also, a “non-radical Christian” is as great a nonsense as a ‘non-political socialist’. Indeed for the church to be non-political is also a nonsense. The Church professes commitment to a new world and to new life. Thus she is by her own definition radical. Christian theology itself is inherently radical. But it harbours major differences about how that radical transformation comes about or should come about. A literalistic approach to the New Testament will not, however, reveal the radicalism which goes back directly to Jesus, because within the NT canon there are non-Pauline, inauthentic Pauline and anti-Paul letters which are designed to make Christianity palatable to the empire.

The critical content of this paper is the initial paper on my and the seven theologians’ ideas of radical church futures, found on the [www.spiritandspice](http://www.spiritandspice.com) website and presented at the April 2003 School of Theology at Palmerston North. Whereas that paper offers a separate summary and comment on each of the most recent books by the seven theologians mentioned, the present paper integrates the seven in order to

tease out the overall conclusions and guidelines - in other words, to try to answer the question of the title: WHAT MIGHT THE VISION OF 21ST CENTURY CHURCH BE IF WE TOOK RADICAL THEOLOGY SERIOUSLY?

The basic proposition is that vision follows theology just as theology follows experience. Each is necessary or, as John Wesley might have put it, to adopt the one is to imply the whole three: experience, theology and vision. In overview, there seem to be about five major directions in today's radical vision.

FIVE VISION-DIRECTIONS FOR THE NEW CHURCH

1.0 To Encourage Creative Understanding of a New Christianity for the 21st Century

We have come to a time when we can give ourselves permission to think the unthinkable. For example, if, as seems evident, there is insufficient evidence in the Gospels to verify the traditional picture of Jesus, nor in the post-Easter New Testament to show that there is one correct doctrine of Christ, then we shall have to make our own 'Christs'. Which in fact we do. Obviously we accord special authority to the view we happen to hold.

But theology is more and more a 'grab-bag'. We might get too precious about our preferred formulations. Each of the seven radical theologians whose work I have attempted to summarise and to some extent interpret, challenges or dismisses the basic assumptions of credal, supernatural theism on which orthodox Christianity is based. (see Cupitt, Borg, Crossan, Funk, Armstrong, Holloway, Spong) Indeed they are pretty much agreed not only that the essence of Christianity has been seriously mistaken in many ways but that the true root or *radix* is simply God's way on earth as glimpsed by Jesus. So bang goes the whole panoply of supernatural beings. In its place is a more humbling thing called 'the way'.

This 'way' was the essence of what Jesus imparted and enacted. It has little or nothing to do with the Trinity of orthodox, credal Christianity. Jesus experienced it as all-pervasive spirit, a domain that was full of the *Being of God*. Spirit was as close as breathing. It follows that a *spirituality* that is inspired by Jesus is about the *embodiment* of the domain of God, realised in the man Jesus but realised also in all who join the way. In this context, *salvation* is a matter of being part of that reign; *wholeness* is a lifegiving experience of the whole community; *compassion* is the core spirit; *forgiveness* is the spiritual transformatory principle.

People saw Jesus as embodying these principles. To be with him felt like being close to God. The dream became the possibility. Possibility was actualised. *Hope* was the awareness of the domain, made real by Jesus' continuing presence.

Further implications may now be drawn:

1.1 The basis of Christianity is ethical action. It is not belief or the profession of orthodox belief-statements. Vision in religion has to manage without credal orthodoxy or conformist demands. People like Borg, Spong, Holloway, Crossan, Cupitt, Armstrong and Funk have argued forcibly the irrelevance of the supernaturalistic credal formula. Each of them in his/her

own way sees the compassionate ethic of the Christian life as the core vision.

1.2 The best we can do in a post-credal world is to exercise practical compassion. This, according to Karen Armstrong, means the adoption of practical benevolence, which “breaks down the hard shell of selfishness, lets others take the place of ego on the throne. We create the sense and the reality of the sacred through the practice of compassion”.

(This last claim is possibly the most significant theological statement this or any century . AW)

1.3 We have to reconceptualise fundamental doctrines. God is ineffable, sacred mystery, beyond all language. God is Being beyond and within all being. The world expresses the one Being. The one is made up of the many.

Doctrines which for the vast majority will no longer convey credibility or new life are those which fracture the cosmos or insult human dignity. Examples of items listed variously by these theologians include:

- The virgin birth
- Resurrection as resuscitation of a three-days dead body
- The bodily ascension of Jesus
- The rescuing saviour and the helpless human
- Baptism as a saving sacrament controlled by a hierarchy of broker-priests
- Eucharist as a repeat sacrifice that keeps God active for us
- An absolutist concept of fixed truth
- Blood-Atonement as a metaphysical cure for a mystical separation from God
- The myth of original sin and its instrumentality in priestly control

As Cupitt points out, history displays the end of Christianity in its credal, orthodox form. The purpose of that system, instituted gradually after New Testament times, was to ensure the continuation of the infant church as it faced the non-return of Jesus. It required an eternal foundation, an absolutist claim to truth and a hierarchy of brokers of privilege. Upon their authority, the people were dependent for the means of grace. Thus was guaranteed the continuance and power of the new institution as a power-broker.

This system worked in Christendom throughout the centuries of belief in Absolute Truth, ie until the *Enlightenment*. Since then, its authority has been eroded under the impact of free human thought. A new, subjective thought-process has become the basis for any religion which claims to address the world as we know it. In the essentially subjective world of spiritual truth, absolutism has now irretrievably lost credibility. No modern philosophical ground remains for claims to expertise on invisible beings.

It follows that the next doctrine to undergo change is that of the *Church*. A move toward laicisation and secularisation of the functions of the Church visibly expresses an irreversible change in the way Christianity will be able to manage its role in any salvation addressed to today’s adults.

1.4 Our image of God can no longer be that of supernaturalistic, interventionist theism, but that of ‘God in everything and everything in God’. God does nothing independent of the principles of the universe. The

prescientific habit of attributing causation of inexplicable phenomena to divine action is an admission of primitive intellect.

- 1.5** This within-all God is not less but more real because as close as life and being, as close as breathing and imagination, inviting participation in ‘the party.’
- 1.6** There is a new myth of incarnation which sees God as being in every human. Humanity and the creation, expressing life, is where God is
- 1.7** The Ethical Kingdom is a celebration of life. In it, as Richard Holloway states, forgiveness is the truest radicalism, thus denying both vengeance and exclusivism.
- 1.8** The human illness, as Spong credibly argues, is better described as *hysteria* than as an historical illness such as ‘the Fall of Man’. I think *depression* might be added. (Depression has recently been placed at the top of the list of disabling illnesses.)
- 1.9** The present unprecedented malaise is only able to be transcended, as Holloway and Spong argue, by celebration of meaning, beyond a spurious objectivity. The salvation in view is not of individuals but of the whole domain. A state of grace is a state in which radical relationship with all of being reflects God, or Being itself. It demands a life-affirming church and a living human-god ecology. Its nature is not individualistic but societal. Thus it cannot be known in isolation from a transformed relationship with the total human and natural culture. Salvation therefore is bound up in the ethic of compassion. Wholeness, or celebration of being, is well-defined by what Jantzen calls ‘flourishing’. (See reference in my earlier paper.)
- 1.10** We must re-think our exclusive claims to authoritative truth. The Christian conceit that it has superior knowledge of God must give way to the fact that, as Marcus Borg observes, ‘God is known in all enduring religions.’ Karen Armstrong observes similarly from study of all three great monotheisms. The ability of some who name themselves ‘Christian’ to claim the right to consign people of unorthodox belief to hell will be seen for what it is – a devilish distortion and a deep well of mental and social illness.

Literalism, placing faith-claims beyond rational criticism, must now be seen as self-contradictory, *first* because there is no single, perfectly consistent story of the faith, whether in the Bible or beyond it; *second*, because the central Christian story, that of Jesus as an historical figure, shows him setting his face against all exclusivism, whether of word, law or action – all, in fact, that placed the human spirit under bondage.

In this context, the use of the dogma of resurrection as resuscitation of a three-day dead body, the ultimate supernatural intervention which demands submission of the thinking self, is unacceptable and irrelevant to the modern mind. It functions as an overwhelming demand for submission to supernatural propositions. As such, though supernaturalistic resurrection was read back into the Jesus story and thus is certainly to be found in the NT record, the physical resurrection and the ascension of Jesus as dogma are contrary to the spirit of Jesus, who propounded no metaphysical dogma such as would demand supernaturalistic belief. That’s why everything between the virgin birth and the death, resurrection and ascension was excluded from the Nicene Creed.

The radical view of the Gospel story rests with the historical-critical principle that the resurrection accounts are distorted by the perceived need to compete with the religions of the time which had visiting gods, divine emperors, sons of the gods, and resurrections as normal occurrences. To compete, even with Messianic expectations, let alone the victory myth underlying the Empire, the Jesus-story had to have victory and resurrection. Jesus had to be divine if he was to fight the Kingdom of Rome. Even in that day, however, resurrection was unacceptable to major intellectual critics. To uphold it was part of the imperial theology and thus a requirement of loyalty to the empire. Albeit, the benefit of resurrection was not available to the mass of the citizenry.

The conclusion of moderate radical critics like Borg is that experience of Jesus is at the core of the continuing faith. The disciples had two experiences of Jesus – the *pre-Easter* experience, when being with Jesus was like being close to God; and the *post-Easter* experience, when they found that the effect of having been with Jesus stayed with them. So, the language of “resurrection” is not quite accurate as applied to the historical Jesus: the experience was of a ‘risen Jesus’ in the sense that he was still effectively with them. His spirit was not vanquished; they were not vanquished. Even those who had not known the pre-Easter Jesus were able to enter or claim that experience of the continued presence of Jesus.

The post-Gospels evangelists constructed a myth which ran out of credibility at the Enlightenment or earlier, but which was in the 20th century forcefully fought for by neo-evangelicalism, and even by those seen as neo-orthodox liberals, such as Bultmann and Tillich. **The unquestioned assumption was that there was a metaphysical salvation to be defended.** That era of *apologia* has now run into the difficulty for the modern mind in granting that there is a Gospel at all like the original to be explained.

A total worldview has come with modern physics which demands that any claimed re-ordering of cosmic relations accept physics and cease asking people to forget their scientific method on Sundays. It is not coincidental that those lay persons who today buy into the primitive cosmology of fundamentalism or even ‘respectable’ conservative evangelicalism are generally of lower socioeconomic status and/or from poverty-stricken nations. The strategy of conversion at the individual level has been rightly displaced, even among church-based development strategists, by a practical, compassion-driven ministry that Armstrong, Holloway, Crossan and Spong would see as much more relevant. They decry supernaturalism – just as religious scientists do. For most, even pious Catholics, it is only a pious myth that the Virgin Mary bent the trajectory of the assassin’s bullet to miss Pope John Paul’s vital organs. Modern want solutions that leave the universe intact.

Holloway sees resurrection as applying to how liberation of souls and minds is addressed in the name of Jesus. At the same time, he and Spong see ‘the resurrection’ as properly referred to within church discourse, as ‘unknowable’. To embrace it calls for an ability to grasp the great themes of human wellbeing and tragedy and to see ‘resurrection’ as refusal to accept imprisonment of the

basic human. This ties in with their view of how to use the Bible as displaying the great human themes, eg of life, providence, bondage, freedom, reverence, service and wonder. Resurrection refers to all such depth experience and transformation of death into life.

Few modern people would expect a radical scholar to believe that ‘the resurrection’ was resuscitation of a thoroughly dead body. But modern theologians seem to be clear that the Jesus who both attracted disciples and incurred the murderous hate of the powers that be, Jewish or Roman, continued to be the major force in the lives of those who knew him or heard the story. Resurrection stories did not offend the intellect of the people of the time, but today, it is impossible for an educated person to believe it in objective terms without loss of intellectual integrity. Granted something ‘awesome’ by way of transformative experience happened to the disciples, but it was of the mind, the emotions and the birth of hope, not a magical up-ending of the laws of the living world.

It is because of this that we find such disciplined minds as Robert Funk and Richard Holloway saying that the resurrection as claimed is unknowable but promises victory in all deaths, whether of the individual or of wider human scope. Holloway indeed urges that we see ‘resurrection’ as refusal to accept any crushing of the human spirit.

We might add that the Bible is very little interested in reassuring people of their personal immortality. The Resurrection is trivialised by use as a guarantee of heaven after death.

1.11 We must get used to a seamless universe. The domain of God consists of only one reality. In it, all events are governed by a set of self-consistent principles in which all parts, whether human, animal, growing things, physical forces or mental processes, are interdependent. There is no other place, time or reality by which to escape and no different set of laws by which to explain what is. Religion is our concession to the irrational, in that because we cannot understand everything, we use words, metaphors, poetry, song, drama, parables and symbolic actions to open life to God’s ways and to express the hope that all is well, all can be well and all will be well. These are not supernatural propositions but poetic evocation of intensely arousing experiences. As such, they do not presuppose separate realities.

It is when these religious sentiments are elevated into positivistic, material propositions that they shatter the integrity of the universe. As objective propositions, they make atheists out of thoughtful people. There is no factual heaven, nor an entity somewhere called ‘God’, and to demand assent to these without any alternative way of understanding them is simply to leave people with the stark options of an often unwilling belief or an equally unwilling atheism. Yet there are many who do not see atheism as a solution. The alternative to supernatural theism is the concept of a God as *All Being*, embracing all things and all beings in an embrace of love, life and being

There is, as both faith and physics can agree, an arrow of direction in the universe, accepted by many cosmologists, that explains why we persist in believing in good and having hope. In that understanding, we engage in corporate or communal activities by which to listen for the voice of the creation and to attune our mind and being to the All Being. It's called *worship*. Like prayer, it has meaning when it issues in ethical action. That God, so experienced, is claimed by Borg and others as 'real'. It would seem that this is what Jesus knew.

And as we next observe, there is a dimension of our experience of this real God that we call 'spiritual'. How do we understand spirituality in a world beyond orthodoxy?

2.0 To Define a Holistic Spirituality

2.1 There is a call to a this-worldly spirituality.

Spirituality after Jesus, as Webster states it, exists "in the midst of life". It can no longer be seen as a privatised luxury. It consists in the way we see, approach, and act upon the world. Its hidden yet ultimately visible and active component is the work of "compassionately helping the world to choose well among critical options and to act on those understandings". In brief, Webster continues, "spirit is realised in the active, compassionate process of enhancing the life of the world". This, he says, following Borg, is "where God is, where Jesus was, and where we find God." He concludes that to internalise this is to realise spirit. Spirit is not an invading force, nor an asset to be appropriated. It is an available capacity, realised by action in the world. It is transformation from within and through interaction with real life.

2.2 The current reform of Christianity consists in its rediscovery of a Kingdom of God theology or a Domain of Being. This is the form of spirituality that emerges in the story of Jesus. That theology implies a *self-creating community*, an ecology which transcends the church. The emerging church will be decreasingly institutional in form, but rather a this-worldly centre for transformation. Just as Jesus effected transformation by expressing 'kingdom principles' but without imposing his conclusions about their application, so the Christian communities comprise domains of possibility: groups which celebrate a life-giving spirit in worldly terms.

2.3 Spirituality is independent of established power-structures . This is so even while expressing itself in and comprising transformatory processes in the world. As a result, both in the context of Jesus and the Kingdom of Rome, and in modern-day contexts, spirituality consists in both challenging and ministering to the domain of the world.

A spirituality which denies such a role has become an individualised, privatised domain of self-gratification. The agony of prayer in Jesus was completely to do with the meaning and the cost of confronting the power-structures – certainly not a struggle to accept some cruel desire of God to

have him slaughtered like some senseless sheep.

3.0 To Define Salvation as World-Making

3.1 Salvation is a Yes-response to the Call to be a Healthy Cell in the organism of God, God's body.

This is an ethical commission which, as Holloway sees it, demands development of ethical human beings and ethical cultures. *The process of transformation is as slow and long as has been the process of deterioration.* This is a profoundly serious reality of sociology, psychology and learning. To become healthy cells is to acknowledge the slow process we know in ourselves and to move beyond superficial notions of change.

3.2 The effective process for change is, broadly speaking, belief.

But as Holloway explains, where belief is effective, it is a "habit of action". Such habits as would be required in an ethical kingdom are individual, social and environmental – in short, they belong to the anatomy of a culture. The deterioration of a culture comprises the loss or absence of necessary habits of constructive, learned responses to society and to other persons. Learning and development, with experiential change are basic.

Holloway argues that there are no theological factors. *This would mean that there are no actions which are in themselves religious.* It is the ethic which makes them religious. This is consistent with Buber's observation that there is nothing that is unholy in itself; only that which has not yet become holy. Lives are composed of ordinary habits of action which become extraordinary when they are driven by an ethical motive. They are Christian or religious where there is intentional choice of the religiously defined ethical or just or compassionate action – which may lead to habit. It is *in* the person and ultimately in the society. It is the latter which Holloway laments as having seriously slipped in modern, Western society.

This is why the vast majority of believers in the sense described above are those who have been surrounded by such belief from early childhood. It is also why momentary experience so seldom effects lasting change. The religious ethic *is* a habit of action. A great failure in modern culture to make such calls upon people – in short the vast deficit of ethical habit-making in modern society - points not only to the absence of a connection between belief and compassion, but also to an impression on the part of many that religion has nothing to do with general human or social processes. Thus great corporations have been challenged to apply ethics to their operations but the church too often 'sticks to religion', innocent of the ethical nature of all religion.

Prayer-Action as the test

This decline in ethical habit-formation leads to the anomaly wherein religion substitutes for social action. In John Spong's revolutionary personal discovery, prayer is meaningless in absence of appropriate action. There is first the *preparation* of ourselves in mind, heart and spirit for the work of the day or the time, then the *prayer- action*, the active

involvement of oneself in the work of what I refer to as ‘world-making.’ Spong eloquently describes his discovery that what he had always called ‘prayer’, his lifetime custom of two hours ‘prayer’ in the morning, he now recognises to be preparation, reflecting, meditating on the work of day. Prayer is inextricably part of the action, never isolated from it. So the process is not complete until he acts. Reflection plus action constitutes prayer.

If Spong is right, prayer as ‘talking to God’ in isolation from action is incomplete and even solipsistic. It can be questioned whether such ‘prayer’ can generate organismic health or make a world. It can as easily be self-delusion. The rules of the healthy organism are not different for spiritual and developmental work. Each demands a wholeness of body, mind and spirit, *ie* thought, feeling and action. Spiritual growth and holistic development differ only in the ethic they express.

In short, *prayer is contemplation issuing in ethical world-making*. The definition of belief as ‘a habit of action’ applies equally to prayer. Prayer is an action-component of belief as a habit of action.

The economy of prayer might be much more efficient if such a rule were applied. World-making is prayer-action.

3.3 For belief to be effective in world-making, it must move beyond dogma, or the pretence of objectivity.

As suggested in Webster’s initial vision paper (see *spiritandspice* website), there is a pressure for a *spirituality* for our time. In the struggle for a *post-Enlightenment* worldview, Christianity is faced with stark alternatives:

- a *dogmatic-objectivist belief-mode*, and
- a *relativist-subjectivist thought-process*.

It is from within a scenario of world terror and militarism which reflects dogmatic supernaturalistic theism on opposing sides of the global power struggle, that Christianity is called to point to an alternative strategy of world-making. *It will eschew dogmatism and will embrace a single humanity*.

The price of the belief that objective truth is the possession of one’s power-group has proven to be too high. A new Christianity or other religion, if it is to be relevant to future survival, will require an ethic which transcends national and dogmatic interests in favour of a one-world living ecology of beings of ultimate value. The contradiction of praying for peace while our religion sends us to dominate ‘unbelievers’ is too crude for words.

So the call for a subjective concept of our spiritual sources is mounting. It is the necessary counter to the traditional view that ‘the faith’ consists in having correctly identified and engaged with divine beings that exist as concrete entities and can be appropriated to our purposes. In other words, the villain is concretistic thinking issuing in imperialistic action. Such thinking does not open up a way to engage with the world, but rather seeks freedom to exploit the ‘real world’. It dogmatically imposes a view of truth and a depersonalised

process of salvation on people whose human processes are treated as irrelevant, if not downright worthless. Thinking as a form of belief must be tempered by the subjective component of an ethic of compassion and justice. Else we will have the Iraq-type wars where the humane ethic is compromised by the determination to expand limitlessly, spurred by the will to act but not shaped by an ethic that demands dethronement of ego.

By comparison, the subjective thought-process raises the meaning of the whole self to the level of the spiritual: the reality it offers comprises a world in flow, a participation in the world-making process, an inclusive reality of all that is, an inclusion of religious knowledge as part of all knowledge, and an acceptance of and respect for all living things and all beings as part of the embodiment of God.

In sum, *world-making is the job of those who love the world and are part of it.*

4.0 To Assign Jesus a Different Role in a This-Worldly Drama of the Now-Presence of the Domain of God. (Refer Funk *Give Jesus a demotion*)

Jesus turned the tide back to God, away from dogma and religious tradition. He simply made God the centre of all that the domain of God meant. This insistence, or consciousness, is enormously powerful for all that is done now in the name of Christ. He did not, for example, make himself the source or object of all that is. He would never have demanded that the whole world bow before him. Certain implications for vision follow.

4.1 We need to recall ourselves to the centrality of God.

The whole structure of credal orthodoxy is based on classical assumptions around 'the person and work of Christ' as it used to be called. This entailed a pre-existent Christ, a divine mission of destruction of the powers of evil through a sacrificial death and a victorious resurrection and ascension, and a final vindication of believers at his return.

In this scenario, the important thing was the divinity of Jesus. As Divine Christ, he was the necessary King in the heavenly chess-game. The new image of a human Jesus as embodying the domain of God puts the classical rationale of his part in salvation to rest. Rather than a central role of a divine Christ-figure – the traditional Christocentrism of evangelical orthodoxy – we have a Jesus whose role is explainable by the new mission that is really the old mission, the oldest there is: the presence of the domain of God. He images God but does not equate with God.

Certainly, as compared with the concept of God as All Being, favoured by the modern mind, Jesus did not have that concept. He was a theist. Yet his consciousness of God was of the all-pervasiveness of holy spirit, explainable only by metaphor and parable.

4.2 We need to re-define Jesus as human forerunner and promise

If, as Robert Funk insists, we must assign Jesus “a new role” it has to be one in which he is both the *fore-runner* of a God-movement in which the purpose and possibility of the world are central, and a *promise* of the realisation of that possibility. It is because of the *humanity* of Jesus that his embodiment of God’s domain is a sign and promise of the fulfilment of religion’s hope.

In this drama, *the indefinability of God is fundamental*. God is a pervading spirit, not an objectively existent ‘it’ or ‘he’. Jesus is endowed with that spirit, of the same order and thus attracts an explanatory terminology: brother, human one, child of God, truth-knower, provoker and facilitator – the list could go on. That new order makes a new being possible for those who commit to his way. ***But he is not to be worshipped.*** To be an object of worship, Jesus would have to be God. That was clearly recognised by the creed-writers. To demote him from divinity is at once to concede that he is not a proper object of worship but that he is our elder brother. God is One, and alone worthy of worship. But not as a deity which can be objectified and whose existence is arguable. As Borg points out, *Being itself is not a matter of argument and is beyond all definition.*

God can only be that which embraces all other beings and yet is other than it all: Being itself; the beyond that contains all contingent life and being; the explanation which cannot be argued but just is. Not being a distant deity, but part of all being, God is worshipped wherever the sacredness of the whole living world is given ultimate worth. It is in Jesus that we see how that value-stance becomes real in a life. It is the Jesus who embodies the Godness of all things who reveals a way by which we ‘can walk with God’ and can live as healthy members of the family of beings that make up the world. *He saves us as and only as we are healed and restored in terms of the domain of God.* That is precisely what the Gospels portray.

4.3 We need to see Jesus as expressing the sacredness of all being

It is this kind of conclusion that we find in people like Holloway. He presents an ethical kingdom in which the truest radicalism appears as forgiveness, inclusiveness and life-affirmation. Armstrong’s evocation of ‘practical benevolence’ as the new definition of ‘the way’ is of the same spirit. This is the nature of the domain of God. To find that, Jesus said, is the ultimate treasure.

5.0 To Be a New Ecclesia

5.1 To Forge a Different Ecclesia, Based on the Domain of God

Clearly, the implication from today’s radical theology is that a new Christianity and *ecclesia* is well overdue.

One indication of it is the hysteria among the evangelical movement. Faced with the decline of institutional Christianity, the traditionalists are claiming every weapon possible to resist change and to reconstitute orthodoxy. Largely defying the fact of cultural change and church decline in the West, they are pulling out all stops to obtain a great conversionist awakening in modern society.

The methods of the evangelical and fundamentalist *reprise*, much of which is Americanised, high-tech tech, high-price, and massively

dependent on the appearance of vast academic prowess and management skills of their key personnel, is to dogmatically impose a strict limit on change. Methods can change but the objective content is dictated by a barely modified biblical literalism. Consequently, there is a sameness in what they do which is skilfully disguised by a superficial gloss of modern know-how. And on the assumption that the numerical success of emotionalistic Christianity in the poorest countries is a sign of a coming revival in the West.

Often it's the Iraq war of triumphalist Christianity, ie the imposition of an ideology and a theology by means of dominant resources. As a world-winning strategy, there is a claim to be driven by democratic motives and a concern to improve the way of life of the target population by injecting a foreign worldview. To do it, they may give the appearance of buying in to the *Kingdom of God* message and could attract some who disagree with their theology. It might even be the point at which a new ecclesia and a re-vamped evangelicalism could begin to join forces. But the initial premises of a credalistic evangelicalism, with a worldview that depends on militant invasion of a lost and sick and dependent humanity by a deity external to them, would not readily suggest a congenial merger. Nor any widespread return to supernatural theism in advanced societies. Still less any rapprochement with post-modernity.

5.2 To Liberate the Church from Pre-Enlightenment Theism

Domination by the 'external other' of supernaturalistic theism must give way to the freedom of an ethical, responsible and just human change process. This is the domain of God and the way of Jesus. The true liberator of the human spirit does not predetermine the expression of freedom. Even Jesus, of course, was a theist. And so his notion of the God of this domain is unsatisfactory for the era of a single, quantum reality. To realise that domain in terms compatible with the modern mind, we must not see it as a sort of property under outside management. Rather the 'property' is 'all there is' and for it to be the present domain of God is to say that there is one, living whole, to be held sacred and to be expressed in terms of enhancement of its inherent goodness.

5.3 To celebrate humanness, the transcendence of limits and the becoming of new selves

The old denigration of humanity is transformed into affirmation. This is the gift of biology and organismic psychology, coupled with the intuition that makes the widest expansion of the self so as to embrace all things living and all being, from which a new flourishing of humanity can come.

5.4 Several practical propositions of Spong and others for a future ecclesia help portray the future church:

- To welcome and celebrate all "expressions of divinity", whether of Christ, other faiths, our own selves, that of all others, that of all things. God is in and of them all and they in and of God. Divinity is not limited.
- To hold before the world the eternal meanings we have found in Jesus
- To search continually for greater truth.

- To be a centre for caring.
- To unite with each other as the first disciples did on the basis of good experiences rather than intellectual explanations.
- To understand the ecclesia, as the expression of the deepest that there is: living as members of God's domain; loving as those who have seen the limitless love embodied in Jesus; and Being, a wholeness of ourselves and all things.
- To be a community in which *belief-action* and *prayer-action* increasingly expresses the present domain of God

Dr Alan Webster
16 Antonio Street
Stratford
New Zealand
Email: A.C.Webster@clear.net.nz

This paper first posted on www.spiritandspice.org.nz.