PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANS AS NEO-LITERALISTS:
The drive for “intellectual integrity” in contemporary Christianity

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Abstract

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Contemporary religious discourses have inherited from modern secularised scientific debates a literalistic worldview in which statements and events are judged to be either true or false and religion is defined as the holding of counterintuitive beliefs. This Master’s paper examines Progressive Christianity in Canada as a movement which has altered its approach to scripture as a direct result of the modern attempt to bring religious activity in line with scientific “truths”. I show that the changing consciousness in modern religiosity in combination with the scholarly search for the historical Jesus has created a movement which promotes the idea of intellectual integrity and a new liberal, literalistic reading of scripture, which I call neo-literalism.
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To my father

Who has in his retirement embarked upon more careers than many do in a lifetime, among those he has been a tireless editor whose commentaries have been both instructive and illuminating.
“However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts.”
–Keats
Introduction

Scenario 1:

“Oh, you study religion?”
I take a short breath and smile weakly. “It’s actually really interesting,” I offer more as an excuse than a fact.
“I’m sure it is,” he replies, “it’s just that I’m not into organised religion!” He explains drawing quotation marks with his fingers over his head, making certain that I understand extent of the offensiveness the term holds. “You know it’s all the dogma and the wars and stuff like that. Like, I just can’t believe that the world was created in seven days. Or that guy being swallowed by a whale? I’m more into personal spirituality.”
“Yeah, sure,” I reply and change the subject. “What do you do?”

Scenario 2:

“Oh, you study religion? Have you read The Da Vinci Code?”
“Yes I have,” I say without emotion, grimacing at the thought that I wasted my entire Easter weekend last year reading the book just so I could answer the inevitable questions to follow.
“So what do you think about it?” She asks, her eyes glowing.
“Well,” I begin, “there are a lot if historical inaccuracies in the book—”.
“...I don’t know very much about that, but what do you think about Mary Magdalene? Was she really there at the Last Supper?”
“Well, I guess... supposing that the Last Supper actually took place, and supposing that Mary Magdalene existed and supposing that she was a disciple of Jesus... maybe she was there? What do you think?”

Much of the modern understanding of religious experiences has drawn from secularised discussion. The contemporary public criticism of religion originates from philosophical and scientific debates that sought to offer alternatives to biblical “truths” regarding origins and moral imperatives of humanity. There is a perception both within and outside of the Christian tradition that the church has sought and continues to seek to stifle and expel those theories and theorists not affirming a literalist interpretation of scripture. The fictional discussions above are representative of those held by frustrated religious studies students in various fields and indicate that for the majority of the secular public, religion (Christianity) is characterised by a literal reading of the Bible and the insistence that one must hold counterintuitive beliefs.
This Master’s essay seeks to clarify the dynamics surrounding this view of religion. In a society that has increasingly embraced alternative spiritualities and new religious movements (involving for example, the powers of crystals and the reading of auras), why do we continue to hold Christianity to an historical and literal interpretation of its tradition? Christianity has inherited from the modern scientific mindset a literalistic worldview that insists upon true or false judgements: The world is round, or flat; evolution is true, or false; Jesus rose from the dead, or remained in his grave. Literalism is, of course, characteristic of fundamentalist Christianity, but, I suggest, also far more evident in liberal Christianity than previously thought. Though liberal Christians have resisted an inerrant view of scripture or dogmatic statements of absolute truth, they nonetheless employ the language of literalism and adopt their own form, which I call “neo-literalism”.

Literalism, along with inerrancy and infallibility, is considered a modern religious phenomenon, occurring as a reaction to scientific developments and perceived threats from secularism (Ammerman 1991; McGrath 2002: 73-78). Literalism stems from the secular scientific mindset that insists upon the above mentioned true or false judgements. For the literalist, in order to make theological assertions regarding biblical passages, the Bible must be seen as an accurate description of historical events. In order to be true, it must be literally true.

I employ the term “neo-literalism” to describe the use of literalism within liberal Christian communities. Neo-literalists are likewise a product of the secular scientific mindset; however, instead of affirming biblical passages as true they reject those passages that do not conform to their liberal worldview. For example, a neo-literalist would reject the idea that Jesus walked on water because it is considered scientifically impossible; likewise, a neo-literalist would reject biblical passages that
appear to forbid the ordination of women because such passages do not adhere to the
neo-literalists’ contemporary moral beliefs.

Modern scientific and scholarly studies have exposed weaknesses behind
biblical truth claims and have forced contemporary Christians to reformulate their
understanding of the Bible’s role in their religious experience. While fundamentalists
have simply rejected scholarly claims, many liberal Christians have incorporated
historical contexts and higher criticisms of the Bible into their approach to scripture.
Some liberal denominations have adopted a symbolic understanding of the texts,
claiming that they are meant to be read as mythological text and not as absolute truth.
I believe, however, that there is a growing liberal movement that rejects this approach.
The Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity serves as an ideal example of neo-
literalism. My research reveals that they refuse to view scripture symbolically and
therefore reject those elements of the Bible not reflective of their (moral and
scientific) liberal worldview.

My first chapter examines the modern situation from which literalism arose. I
also explore the transformation of the definition of “belief”, which, according to
Wilfred Cantwell Smith, has dramatically altered the ways in which religious people
operate. A predominant change that has occurred is, according to Northrop Frye, the
rise of a literalist mindset—scientific and religious—which has created a generation of
what he calls the “imaginative illiterate”. Though people like Marcus Borg and Sally
McFague have offered alternatives to this approach, I show that even those who reject
literalism are forced to operate within its categories.

My second chapter looks at the effects of scholarly hermeneutics upon
Christian communities. The attempts of scholars, such as Albert Schweitzer, to expose
the objective historical contexts within which the texts were written led theologians
such as Rudolf Bultmann and Schubert Ogden to call for a demythologizing of the Bible. The contemporary work of the Jesus Seminar, which employs a democratic methodology to reconstruct the historical activities and teachings of Jesus, has allowed for a public dialogue in which Christians can debate the historical accuracy of certain passages.

Public discourse regarding the historicity of biblical narratives has required Christian communities to become more educated regarding their faith tradition. In my third chapter I identify neo-literalism as rooted within a general need for “intellectual integrity” as experienced by modern believers. Popular publications such as British Bishop John A. T. Robinson’s *Honest to God* (1963) and Canadian journalist Pierre Berton’s *The Comfortable Pew* (1965) are the precursors of this movement. The drive for intellectual integrity when combined with contemporary scientific and liberal worldviews creates the ideal situation for the rise of neo-literalism. John Shelby Spong (retired Episcopalian Bishop, author, and proponent of a ‘New Reformation’) serves as a contemporary voice for intellectual integrity. I identify the presence of neo-literalism within his works.

In my final chapter I explore the formation of Progressive Christianity as an example of both neo-literalism and the desire for intellectual integrity. Progressive Christianity views itself as a “church within a church,” and defines itself as embodying “practical reality to words penned by scholars” (Vosper 2004). It places considerable emphasis on its link to academia, particularly the Jesus Seminar. I differentiate between the American movement, which takes a more traditional approach to scripture and liturgy, and the Canadian movement, which is characteristic of the neo-literalism I describe above.
In order to gather my evidence for this discussion, I met with Rev. Gretta Vosper, the chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, at her church West Hill United in Scarborough, Ontario and conducted a formal interview. My research has taken mostly an ethnographic approach, relying both on first-hand observations and interviews. Since Progressive Christianity considers itself to be a mostly virtual network (McPhee 2005: 16) a component of my research has depended upon web resources, including the official sites of the Progressive Christianity Network and sites of affiliated organisations and individuals. Ethnographic evidence has been criticised by scholars of religion such as Jonathan Z. Smith who points out that this evidence depends mostly “upon intuition, a chance association, or the knowledge one happens to have at the moment of another culture” (Smith 1978: 248-9). While I have attempted to interpret my interviews, discussions and observations in an unbiased manner, I agree with Smith that ethnographic research is often subject to chance.

In this work I begin an exploration of the presence of a new form of literalism which I believe is a result of the increased discussions between scientific, historical and religious worldviews. Progressive Christianity has offered itself as the alternative to counterintuitive belief structures and embraced a neo-literalist approach to scripture. But does Progressive Christianity truly represent a viable change in Christian consciousness? Like other reformation movements before it, Progressive Christianity is forced to operate within the discourses it has inherited. This paper seeks to clarify those discourses and to identify their presence within contemporary Christianity.
Chapter One
Modern Religiosity

The modern religious experience has been shown to have undergone a series of transformations. Scholars such as Charles Taylor (1991) have noted that modernity has been characterised by an increased sense of alienation and moral relativism. Taylor explains that as civilisations develop, they experience a loss or decline of certain features of their culture (1). In this paper, I show that the rise of the modern consciousness in the West has changed the categories in which religious experiences are defined. I explore the dynamic between those who have reacted against and those who support these new categories of belief (characterised by an emphasis upon the cognitive experience). In this section I set forth to identify those categories I consider essential to my discussion of neo-literalism and its role within Progressive Christianity, namely, the transformation of what it means to ‘believe’ something and the rise of literalism resulting from this new understanding of belief.

As Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1977) has noted, “modern logic has perpetrated the unsubtlety that every meaningful statement is either true or false” (27). The effects of this worldview upon religion, particularly upon Christianity (with its greater emphasis upon orthodoxy), have led to a situation of polarization, with religion on one side and rationality on the other. Smith’s judgement is that “those who make belief central to religious life have taken a wrong turning” (37). Regardless, in contemporary Christianity it is apparent that belief, as the cognitive component of religious activity, has been determined by modern Westerners to be the definitive characteristic of affiliation with a religious community. Consequently, those who set out to join a church are asked to make declarations of faith—either through the rituals of baptism or
confirmation, or else through the recitation of creeds by which individuals affirm their belief in God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and future resurrection of the body. Both those within and outside of the Christian tradition identify beliefs (as revealed through a church’s doctrines) as the primary characteristic determinative of one’s role within a church community. Smith, however, contends that the confusion surrounding “belief” is rooted not in doctrinal traditions but in an etymological misunderstanding.

**Quest for the Historical Meaning of Belief**

Smith’s works serve to clarify this misunderstanding and, among other things, to chronicle the development of the word “belief” (which he contends is a mistranslation of the Latin *credo*) from its initial meaning to present day. Our contemporary use of the word “belief” refers to an affirmation of, or, “the holding of certain ideas” (Smith 1979: 12). This definition is tainted by a notion of uncertainty as to the accuracy of the belief statement. Smith cites a dictionary definition that defines belief as “an opinion or conviction” then offers the example, “the belief that the earth is flat”. Likewise, Donald Lopez (1998) suggests that belief is often used to express disbelief, such as in “I can’t believe he ate the whole pie” (22). According to Smith, this definition serves to show that “the primary connotation of the term in modern usage has come to be with ideas that are false” (120).

While generations of Christians have recited and affirmed their beliefs on a weekly basis, Lopez explains that belief, though appearing to be a simple and familiar concept, is actually burdened by “a long and complicated history in Christian theology, in philosophy, and in writing about religion” (21). In Christian theology, belief often corresponds with ultimate questions pertaining to the existence of God
and miracles (Lopez 1998: 23). Belief is also proffered as the means through which one obtains salvation (access to heaven), an understanding prompted by Pascal’s infamous wager, suggesting that, despite lack of evidence regarding the existence of God it was more profitable to proclaim belief and reap the benefits should God turn out to be a reality.

Initially “to believe” meant “to hold dear” a term originating from the mediaeval Anglo-Saxon “leof” or “liof” (dear). This understanding is still implicit when one compares believe to a similar English word, “beloved”, which stems from “lufu” (love) (Smith 1979: 106; Lopez 1998: 22). With this in mind, one can immediately see that believe becomes the obvious translation of the Latin word *credo*, from the root *cor, cordis*, (heart) and translates literally as “I set my heart on” or “I give my heart to” (Smith 1979: 76). For Smith, this translation is essential because it clarifies a constant misunderstanding which occurs when moderns approach scripture. Rather than interpreting “belief in x” as something to be held dear, the modern reader understands “x” as something to be viewed as absolutely true.¹

Smith explains that such modern misreadings have served to re-enforce the twentieth-century construction of believing, so much so that upon encountering an ancient discussion of belief, a contemporary mind unconsciously interprets the statements in light of present definitions (109). Thus today, when the existence of God is no longer a universal assertion in the modern worldview, belief has become

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¹ Smith employs as an illustration a sermon delivered by John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, for the funeral of Henry VII (1509). Rochester preaches that though the king was indisputably a sinner, there is hope that he will find rest “in our lorde” because he “byleue of god” (108). A modern translation of this sermon relates that despite his sins, the king has gone to heaven because he affirmed the existence of God—belief being the primary measure of one’s stance as a Christian. But according to Smith, a mediaeval worldview would automatically assert that God exists and therefore be no measure of one’s faith. A mediaeval declaration of belief would assert that: “given the reality of God, as a fact of the universe, I hereby proclaim that I align my life accordingly, pledging love and loyalty” (118). Therefore, it is Henry’s “stedfast byleue”—his holding dear in pledging love and loyalty to God (and according to the Bishop to the sacraments of the church) which stand as a measure of the king’s faith and assures the mourners that their beloved king awaits them in paradise (108).
something requiring faith in order to operate. Smith explains that it is our
contemporary construction of faith and belief that generated “the schoolboy’s
devastating quip: ‘faith is believing what you know ain’t so’” (124).

According to Smith, classically the emphasis of religions was upon faith,
rather than belief (vii). For Smith, faith is the element of religion that acts as the initial
generator of the tradition and is seen as an engagement. In terms of Christianity, this
engagement is seen as “the involvement of the Christian with God and with Christ and
with the sacraments and with the moral imperatives and with the community” (5).
Smith argues in favour of examining ‘faith’ apart from ‘faith in x’, noting that too
much attention has been granted to the object towards which one directs faith, rather
than the notion of faith as a human quality or characteristic (6-7). This can be
compared to Jim Adams’ (1989) understanding that faith is “a gift that not everyone
receives” (32). Adams supports this claim with scripture, noting that it is listed by
Paul in his letter to the Corinthians as one of several manifestations of the Spirit.² And
while Adams employs this understanding to declare that our contemporary
understanding of faith—which, according to Smith, is used in Western Christian
discourses interchangeably with belief (1979: 10)–means that it can no longer be the
determining factor of one’s religious identity, his use of scripture is helpful in
demonstrating that in antiquity faith was seen not as a cognitive act but rather as a
human characteristic or, for the early Christians, as a manifestation of God.

² 1 Corinthians 12: 7-11 “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common
good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge
by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one
Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to
another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these
are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (NRSV).
This transformation of the definition of belief has created tension in the modern world between religious conservatives and traditionalists and those who, following the work of scholars such as Smith and Lopez, advocate that a new understanding of the role of religious belief must be created. But even amongst liberal churches the notion of ‘belief’ is still definitive—liberal communities place an emphasis upon ‘God’s love’ or ‘Jesus’ ethical teachings’ and make declarations such as “we don’t believe in Satan”, “we believe this passage is symbolic” or “we believe that God loves everyone regardless of race, sexual orientation, or social status”. It is apparent that even those who react against beliefs that do not correspond with a scientific worldview still do so within the category of belief.

For those who do subscribe to traditional notions of Christian belief, the requirement becomes that one must have faith in order to believe. This understanding has been promoted by conservative Christian churches that employ the terms “Bible church” or “Bible-believing” in order to distinguish themselves from liberal churches. These churches assert that in order to truly be privy to the religious experience of Christianity they must suspend their disbelief in those elements of the Christian narrative that transcend rationality. Rather, the devotee is told to have faith that, despite the incredulity, one must believe as a sign of one’s allegiance to Christianity and in order to gain access to God, in this life and the next.

**Literalism**

Much research has been conducted concerning the characteristics of fundamentalist religious mentalities, primarily the insistence among such communities that the Bible should be read as inerrant. Biblical literalism is believed to be a modern Protestant phenomenon.
Marcus Borg (2001) identifies literalism as a modern development, because it requires a conscious decision to read texts literally.³ Borg differentiates between natural literalism (which he believes to be the pre-modern approach employed in reading scripture) and modern literalism (also known as “conscious literalism”) (9). A pre-modern Christian might have read the creation account in Genesis and believed it to be literally true, lacking any scientific knowledge to dispute this account. A modern literalist must make a conscious choice to reject scientific evidence and choose to read Biblical scriptures literally. Proponents of this movement who take pride in their exclusion of non-biblical sources believe that it requires “faith” to “believe things which would otherwise be difficult to believe” (9).

Because Christian communities⁴ who adopt this literalistic worldview are characteristically conservative, their appeal to biblical authority results in a conflict

³Borg (2001) and his followers, of course, reject the above discussed form of conscious literalism. Instead he advocates an historical-metaphorical approach. Borg’s inclusion of both the historical and the metaphorical acts in such a way to balance his approach to scripture. For Borg the metaphorical understanding immediately implies that there can be no literal interpretation of the language because, “a metaphorical approach to the Bible thus emphasises metaphors and their associations. It emphasises seeing, not believing. The point is not to believe in a metaphor, but to see in light of it” (41). According to Borg, the historical and metaphorical approaches to reading the Bible are dependent upon each other: “The historical needs the metaphorical so that the text is not imprisoned in the past. The metaphorical needs the historical so that it does not become subjective fancy” (44).

Borg’s use of the historical approach allows him to assert that it is meaningless to insist that the Bible is partially human and partially divine. He explains, “affirming that the Bible is both divine and human leads to the attempt to separate the divine parts from the human parts--as if some of it comes from God and some is a human product. The parts that come from God are then given authority, and the others are not. But the parts that we think come from God are normally the parts we see as important, and thus we simply confer divine authority on what matters to us, whether we be conservatives or liberals” (27). Thus, Borg is able to take an historical approach to the Bible while still maintaining a metaphorical understanding of the role the texts might play in religious experiences.

⁴In his discussion of the reason for this stringent literalism often found in Christianity, as opposed to other world religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism, Raymond Martin (2000) explains that Christianity is different in that it sets historical beliefs as the central component of the religious tradition. Martin’s understanding of other world religions is that Hinduism and Buddhism are generally concerned with the ultimate nature of things. Other Eastern religions such as Daoism and Confucianism are concerned with providing regulations for how to live. Judaism, he argues, though concerned with historicity, also define its religious identity through ethnicity. Regarding Islam, Martin believes that though it resembles Christianity, in that it is determined through historical beliefs, the historical criticisms of Islam have not had the same effect because “it can be so personally dangerous to be a critic of Islam” (10). Central to the Christian message, however, is the concept that sins have been dissolved through the death and resurrection of Jesus--without the actual occurrence of this event, the traditional understanding of their relationship with God, for many Christians, would disappear.
with more liberal-minded Christians who attempt to view biblical texts within their original contexts and accept many writings as metaphorical or symbolic. For example, Borg identifies a conflict between a conservative “literal-factual” approach to scripture and a liberal “historical-metaphorical” approach (ix). He furthermore identifies three central conflicts as the defining characteristics, or “litmus test,” of loyalty to either side. These are the debates surrounding the origins of human life, homosexuality, and historical Jesus scholarship (6).

Northrop Frye, in the final publication before his death, The Double Vision (1991), summarised the relationship between religion and figurative languages. He was critical of the modern culture of literalism that has created what he terms the ‘imaginative illiterate’–a group Robert W. Funk (1996) believes is a product of the worldview created by emphasizing the empirical sciences. In this scientific worldview statements and beliefs are ascribed values of either scientifically true or false. Funk concludes that this means that for many people (religious or secular) understanding can therefore only be literal, a trend he believes “dominates both high and naive levels of culture” (51).

Frye wrote, concerning Christian literalism, “what concerns me in this situation is a linguistic fallacy, the fallacy that relates to the phrase ‘literally true’. Ordinarily, we mean by ‘literally true’ what is descriptively accurate . . . we call what we read ‘true’ if it seems to be a satisfactory verbal replica of the information we seek” (14). 5 But, as Frye explains for modern readers, in order for information to become true it must be proven according to scientific knowledge that was not present

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5 According to Frye, “with the rise of writing culture, truth came to be regarded as descriptive truth and called ‘literal’ . . . But nobody takes the Bible literally in this sense” (Frye in Denham 2003: 72). Frye illustrates this using the example of the phrase ‘the kingdom of heaven is within you’ (Luke 17:21) which while many people may disagree about its meaning, no one takes it to literally mean that the kingdom of heaven is inside in the same way that food is inside. From this Frye concludes that all discussions regarding meaning must begin with an interpretation of the metaphors’ presence and purpose (72).
Frye equates spiritual literalism to what Paul calls, “the letter that kills” because “it sets up an imitation of descriptive language, a pseudo-objectivity related to something that isn’t here” (14-15).

Frye advocated that the Bible should be understood as a work of literature. As John Aitken explains, “in a legendary undergraduate course, Frye reminded his students that when the Bible is historically accurate, it is only accidentally so: reporting was not of the slightest interest to its writers. They had a story to tell which could only be told by myth and metaphor: what they wrote became a source of vision rather than doctrine. For the reader, the historical event is now ‘out of our range’—only the verbal event concerns us” (Aitken in Frye 1991: xii). For Frye, the preoccupation with historical events has created a situation where the notion that the Bible is an historical document has been continuously reinforced. He writes,

in the early Christian centuries it was widely assumed that the basis of Christian faith was the descriptive accuracy of the historical events recorded in the New Testament and the infallibility of the logical arguments that interconnected them. This pseudo-literalism was presented as an assertion without the evidence of sense experience, and belief became a self-hypnotizing process designed to eke out the insufficiency of evidence (1991: 15).

Frye believes, however, that the Gospel writers were plain and simple people, which he acknowledges might lead one to believe that they would write in a plain and simple, accurate descriptive historical narrative. Instead, he explains, the Gospel writers “were still plainer and simpler than this: plain and simple enough to write in the language of myth and metaphor [because] they already regarded what they had to say as too important to be entrusted to the language of description” (Frye in Denham 2003: 73).

Sally McFague (1982), an early advocate on behalf of the feminist-metaphorical understanding of scripture, explains that literalism is a modern
development. Drawing upon Geertz, she explains that our self-constructed worlds are something we hold to most firmly under threat—even subconsciously, a threat to our construction of the world is interpreted as a threat to our very being. Thus, in contemporary secular society, religious communities become “more literalistic, absolutist, dogmatic when the construction which orders their world is relativized, either through pluralistic perspectives from within the tradition or competing systems from without” (6-7). Unlike their ancestors, contemporary Christians simply “do not think in symbols in the way our forebears did. That is to say, we do not see the things of this world as standing for something else; they simply are what they are” (5).

According to McFague, the claim can be made that our time is more literalistic than any other time in history. Not only were double, triple and more meanings once seen in Scripture (and Scripture considered richer as a consequence), but our notion of history as the recording of “facts” is alien to the biblical consciousness. The ancients were less literalistic than we are, aware that truth has many levels and that when one writes the story of an influential person’s life, one’s perspective will color that story (5).

McFague identifies one of the primary problems of modern religious conceptions pertains to religious language. She explains that it is a problem unique to contemporary religious experiences: “for most of us, it is not a question of being sure of God while being unsure of our language about God. Rather, we are unsure both at the experiential and the expressive levels” (1). She explains that we exist in a secular world in which an experience of God is private, sporadic and questionable. McFague’s uncertainty at the expressive level emerges when individuals become aware of the interpretive contexts applicable to biblical scholarship. This knowledge originates the belief that any attempt to speak about God is limited to cultural, social and historical perspectives. McFague observes that the issues become polarised—“either we take our language about God literally or we find it meaningless” (4).
Funk (1996) identifies two literalist identities explaining that “it doesn’t seem to matter that the literalist understands the term literal in different senses on different occasions” (51). According to Funk, a literalist may take her understanding of “literal” in either a descriptive or conventional manner. A descriptive reading includes “true-to-fact assertions”; thus when they read the passage that declares that ‘Jesus walked on water’, they believe that the event actually occurred. A conventional understanding, on the other hand, implies a literal reading of expressions or events that are taken for granted to mean something else. Funk notes that this means that “when used to mean what everyone takes for granted, the ‘literal’ sense may thus also include the nonliteral” (52). Funk explains that expressions such as “the iron curtain” are popular expressions understood to have specific meanings, in this case “an impenetrable political boundary”. When applied to scripture, a conventional literalist reading allows the literalist to clearly assert that “Jesus dying for sins quite ‘literally’ means that he paid the price demanded by God with his sacrificial blood” (52).

According to Borg, literalism is prevalent within both the liberal and conservative factions of the church in different forms; he explains that “within the church, both biblical fundamentalists and Christian liberals are often fact fundamentalists” (2001: 16). Fundamentalists foster the belief that the whole Bible must be consistently and factually true; otherwise, it cannot be true at all. Liberals, according to Borg, agree that it is the facts that matter but rather than view the entire Bible as true they have sought “to rescue a few facts from the fire” (16). Borg identifies an important component of both liberal and conservative biblical beliefs, that is, that both seek to discern the veracity of biblical texts in terms of factual truths.

I contend that this desire to “rescue a few facts from the fire” from the liberal side, as well as the conservative sentiment of being under attack, stem from an
increased interest among scholars in attempting to discern the historical biography of Jesus comparable to the version presented in the Gospels. My examination of neo-literalism begins with this scholarship.
Chapter Two
Jesus Scholarship: The Historical and Contemporary Quest

Raymond Martin (2000) identifies an increased interest over the past few decades, among laity (both non-clergy and non-academic) in the quest for the historical Jesus (ix). This quest has emerged from an understanding of the development of scripture—namely a desire to study the text in the context of the historical period in which it was written prior to its being declared canonical (Smith 1993: 4).

In my previous chapter, I discussed the modern transformations regarding the notion of what it means to believe something and the emphasis exact truths have had upon Christian communities that view the Bible as literal and inerrant. However, this interest in asserting truths of Biblical texts is not exclusive to conservative Christian communities. Many liberal Christians and secular scholars likewise desire to know what they can affirm to be true, within biblical texts, according to an historical, hermeneutical study.

Commencing in the nineteenth century, hermeneutics represented an attempt to contextualise biblical writings in light of historical circumstances. As Anthony C. Thisleton (1995) explains, “up to this point in the history of thought it [hermeneutics] had served simply to validate or to explain some prior understanding of a text at which an interpreter or community of interpreters had already arrived” (48). Contemporary research, however, seeks to deny any theological involvement in research involving present understanding of the evidence regarding Jesus as an historical figure. This historical study begins with the assumption that the acts and
words of Jesus should be consistent with those of a first century Jew living in Palestine.

In this section I propose to explore the important developments in historical and contemporary Jesus scholarship, beginning with Albert Schweitzer’s monumental work, itself influenced strongly by the 1900s German history of religions school. Following that I look at the theological response to these studies, in particular Bultmann’s demythologizing of scripture. These works arose as a product of eighteenth–and nineteenth–century worldviews including an increased emphasis on rational experience. The work of the Westar Institute and the Jesus Seminar is presented as the predominant public voice of contemporary scholarship in the field. Parallel to the earlier work of Bultmann, contemporary Jesus scholarship may be seen as the academic counterpart to the works of pop-theologians such as John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg.

The Historical Quest

From the very beginning, the idea of the quest for the historical Jesus has had special implications for North American Anglo-Christianity. The term itself is a result of the poetical English translation of Albert Schweitzer’s Von Reimarus zu Wrede:

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6 It should be noted that my interest is primarily in the effects of such scholarship upon religious communities. This section serves as a venue to discuss primarily the motivations and consequences for the scholarship, rather than the findings (about which there exists a plethora of scholarship).

7 Likewise Bultmann's work predated a generation of 1960s pop-theologians, such as John Robinson whose work will be discussed in Chapter Three.

8 The majority of Spong’s work can easily be classify as pop-theology, it might be argued that while some of Borg’s work is intended for a popular audience, it is informed by his academic training as a bible scholar and is therefore not in the same category as Spong. Borg’s scholarship, however, is often consumed by, and used to further the theories of, pop-theologians.
Eine Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung (1906). The subtitle of this work literally translates as “A History of Research upon the Life of Jesus” and bears no reference to the idea of a conquest or a journey (Robinson 1983: 26). Thus it is not until the English translation that this work introduces the notion of a “quest”. John Dominic Crossan (1999) is critical of the term “quest,” pointing out that it implies “a positivistic process in which we are going to attain an answer once and for all forever” (5). Rather, Crossan advocates that the process be seen as one involving a reconstruction of the historical Jesus continuously updated as new methodologies are comprised and never proffering a definite conclusion (5). While I think Crossan’s criticism of the term “quest” is overly cautious, I echo his concerns that Jesus scholarship be considered an ongoing process.

Schweitzer sought to record the development of historical Jesus scholarship. He credits Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) with initiating the search for the historical Jesus as distinguished from the Christ of faith. Following Reimarus, Schweitzer presents David Friedrich Strauss’s Life of Jesus Critically Examined (1835) as an influential element of the scholarship. As the Jesus Seminar explains, “Strauss distinguished what he called the ‘mythical’ (defined by him as anything legendary or supernatural) in the gospels from the historical” (Funk et al., 1993: 3; cf. Ford 1997: 10). Strauss’s methodology entailed examining each New Testament episode involving Jesus and proposed that “any narrative should be rejected as nonhistorical if it is inconsistent with itself or with other equally credible accounts, or if the events depicted in it violate known natural laws” (Martin 2000: 37). Though Strauss was not the first to suppose that the miracle stories not be read literally—others had proposed natural explanations—he was the first to insist that the miracle accounts were intentionally fantastical.
Schweitzer’s work served to show that much of the earlier Jesus scholarship had served as a projection of already arrived at preconceptions and he concluded that “it is a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus” (403). Schweitzer’s analysis provides, in part, an explanation as to why the quest for the historical Jesus emerged as it did in European society. The Enlightenment mentality of the eighteenth century resulted in a general sentiment that religion was required to be rational according to the scientific worldview. Furthermore, it was generally accepted that history was “the most reasonable measure of truth” (Johnson 1999: 51).

Ultimately, Schweitzer concluded that there was little that could be known about the historical Jesus. He determined that Jesus can be seen as an eschatological prophet who thought that a cataclysmic end was imminent and therefore his ethical system was considered to be only an “interim ethic” (Funk, et al., 1993: 3). According to Luke Timothy Johnston (1999), Schweitzer concluded that there are two approaches to Jesus scholarship, both of which are ineffective: “either the gospels are utterly unreliable regarding the identity and ministry of Jesus, or (if they are reliable) the Jesus they present is so totally different from the present as to be unassimilable” (49). An historical Jesus scholar is presented with two options regarding the use of the gospels as sources to determine Jesus’ narrative. The first is to choose between the diverging narratives so as to rule one version correct and exclude conflicting versions. The second option, favoured by more contemporary “questers,” is an admission that the choice of method ultimately reflects the understandings and religious concerns of the scholar (52-3).

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9 This option will be discussed more fully in my discussion of The Jesus Seminar.
For some time Schweitzer’s work was seen as the significant source and ultimate determinate regarding the Jesus controversy. Following Schweitzer’s publication the field was dominated by neo-orthodox theologies such as those of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Agreeing with Schweitzer, neo-orthodox theologians reached the conclusion that it is impossible to recover the real Jesus in the gospels. The Jesus Seminar criticises both Barth and Bultmann because they “dismissed the quest of the historical Jesus as an illegitimate attempt to secure a factual basis for faith–an attempt to ‘prove’ Christian claims made on behalf of Jesus” (Funk et al., 1993: 4).

As both a theologian and a New Testament scholar, Bultmann concluded, in *Jesus and the Word* (1934), “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources of Jesus do not exist” (Bultmann in Marshall 1977: 12). Regardless of this limited knowledge, Bultmann concludes that all that Christians really need to know about Jesus is preserved in a “demythologized” version of the gospels and exists primarily as a call to authenticity (Martin 2000: 43).

Bultmann’s contribution to the historical Jesus debate was to “draw attention to the ‘hermeneutical’ problem of interpreting the Christian gospel meaning of the New Testament, in an age which no longer accepts the pre-scientific picture of the world it presupposes” (Morgan 1997: 78). His conclusion to this problem, according to Morgan, was to call for a demythologizing of biblical scripture to ensure the elimination of mythological constructions when one is interpreting meaning of biblical texts. For Bultmann, the gospel is not myth; according to Schubert Ogden (1961), Bultmann suggested that the “true intention” of the New Testament’s
mythological presentation is that the Christ event not be seen as a mythical event (76). This, he explains, is apparent because Jesus, unlike the Hellenistic deities, is an historical figure. Furthermore, he suggests that the conflicting presentation of legends (such as the virgin birth or the empty tomb) can be seen as indicators that the Christ-event was not meant to be read objectively but rather must be approached through critical interpretation (77).

Anthony C. Thiselton (1997) explains that Biblical theology after the 1960s lost the momentum it had established in the responses of the 1950s (524). Contemporary hermeneutics, he explains, “has become marked by a radical pluralism of goals, assumptions and methods” (526), the result of more recent hermeneutical studies—being focussed on a secular rather than a theological history. But as Raymond Martin explains there remains a relationship between the academic study of Jesus and worship. Martin explains that, initially, Bultmann’s demythologized vision of Christianity was popular among Christian intellectuals but “has always been too thin for the majority of ordinary Christians” (10). Increasingly, even Christian intellectuals have found problems with Bultmann’s vision—Martin points to Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright—and recent historical Jesus scholarship has likewise found problems with demythologizing as a final response.

**The Jesus Seminar and the Contemporary Quest**

The Jesus Seminar established by the Westar Institute stands as a well-respected but often controversial example of an historical Jesus study. According to the Seminar’s monumental work, *The Five Gospels* (Funk et al., 1993), scholars in the 1970s and 1980s were surprised to discover that after decades of theological control over biblical studies, a renewed interest in the historical life of Jesus (free from neo-
orthodoxy or commitment to the image of an eschatological prophet) had emerged (4). Furthermore, as Raymond Martin (2000) explains, whereas in the past scholarly investigation relied mostly upon literary sources and limited archaeological data, contemporary scholars are able to make use of a variety of interdisciplinary methodologies including work in social sciences, linguistics and anthropology (45).

The Jesus Seminar was initiated in 1985 by Robert W. Funk, who invited thirty scholars to gather in an attempt “to identify an agreed inventory of sayings and actions by Jesus that could serve as a database for Jesus studies” (Jenks 2000: 2). As Funk explains, the initial regulations they established were crucial to the overall scholarship of the Seminar. Unlike other scholarly institutions, the Seminar deemed that with each issue they “would come to a decision, no matter how provisional or tentative” (Funk 2000: 11; 1996: 8). Jenks likewise echoes this approach as pivotal to the success of the Seminar, evidenced by the participation of numerous scholars since its initial formation: “over the intervening years more than two hundred scholars have participated in the Jesus Seminar. Many of the originals continue as Fellows, while others have moved their attention to other research interests. There have typically been a little over 75 Fellows at any one time” (2). Both Jenks and Funk also indicate that the Seminar’s practice of publishing their work in “non-technical language” is an important contribution to the Seminar’s popularity because it allowed non-specialists (many of whom are associate members of Westar) to access and understand the debates.

The Seminar’s commitment to decisiveness is important because it separates the Seminar’s scholarship from that of other academics. At the end of each debate they were able to declare the consensus and draw a conclusion from the majority opinion. In order to do so the Seminar utilised a voting system using four colours of
beads as the measure of each participant’s view regarding the reliability of scripture passages in representing the acts or words of Jesus. The bead’s colour corresponds to the degree of scholars’ belief regarding the passage’s authenticity:

- **red:** I would include this item unequivocally in the database for determining who Jesus was.
- **pink:** I would include this item with reservations (or modifications) in the database.
- **grey:** I would not include this item in the database, but I might make use of some of the content in determining who Jesus was.
- **black:** I would not include this item in the primary database.

(Funk, et al., 1993: 36).

Marcus Borg explains that the voting procedure should be understood not as a finalised declaration of what Jesus did or said, but rather is useful as a measure of current scholarly opinion (1994: 163).

As Jenks reports, while employing this system the Seminar began with fifteen hundred versions (both canonical and non-canonical) of five-hundred sayings attributed to Jesus and determined that ninety were potentially authentic (red or pink votes) (Funk et al., 1993: 35). The results of these deliberations along with explicit commentaries were published in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993). This work consists of a new colour-coded English translation of the four canonical gospels and the Sayings Gospel attributed to Thomas. Members of the Seminar consider *The Five Gospels* to be a more authentic and gender-inclusive rendition of the original texts (Borg 1994: 164). Following this, the Seminar employed the same methodology to Jesus’ 176 reported deeds and determined that twenty-nine (ten red, nineteen pink) were considered authentic (Jenks 2000: 3). The results of this study were printed in the Seminar’s work *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (1998).
The Seminar’s recent endeavour has been an attempt to understand the effects of, and to make public, historical Jesus scholarship within the Church. The Seminar’s most recent publications include collections of addresses given by well-known Jesus fellows such as Borg, Spong, Crossan and others in works such as: *The Once and Future Jesus* (2000), *Profiles of Jesus* (2002) and *The Historical Jesus Goes to Church* (2004). The effect of such scholarship has had a pronounced effect upon liberal Christians. For example, John Spong (also a Fellow of the Seminar and a prominent advocate for intellectual integrity) has written, “unless theological truths can be separated from pre-scientific understandings and rethought in ways consistent with our understanding of reality, the Christian faith will be reduced to one more ancient mythology that will take its place alongside the religions of Mount Olympus” (Spong 1992: 31). Spong’s view is representative of a growing movement of theologians who, upon encountering historical Jesus scholarship, have attempted to repackage the information in a more accessible format for ordinary people and to re-theologise the effects of this scholarship under the pretense that to do so will reinvigorate the church.

Critics of the Jesus Seminar often dismiss its methods. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2000), for example, indicates that she questions the Seminar because its “polling method uses a reductionist consumer approach derived from market research, insofar as scholars cast votes to decide whether Jesus texts are authentic or secondary” (135). Elsewhere, she is critical of the notion that there can be one “true historical” account of the Jesus narrative, explaining that “historical-Jesus books feed into literalist fundamentalism by reasserting disinterested scientific positivism in order to shore up the scholarly authority and universal truth of their research portrayal of Jesus” (46). Similarly, John Meier explains that there now exist three Jesus characters:
the real Jesus, the historical Jesus, and the theological Jesus. Meier indicates that both the historical and the theological are reflections of the real Jesus; each is subject to a set of constraints imposed by those who wish to defend the certitude of their Jesus.

Other critics such as Kwok Pui-lan have observed that the quest for the historical Jesus, including that of the Jesus Seminar, is a politically driven one:

New Testament survey books tell us that the first quest for the historical Jesus took place in the nineteenth century. But they do not specify that the quest took place in Europe and there were in fact two quests, not one: the quest for Jesus and the quest for land and people to conquer. Is it mere coincidence that the newest quest for the historical Jesus is taking place in the United States, when the U.S. is trying to create a Pax Americana? (Pui-lan in Jackson 2004: 83).

It is of interest that Pui-lan, Meier and Schüssler Fiorenza all equate the Seminar’s goals or methodology with those of conservative Christian fundamentalists. This comparison is noteworthy as an instance of both liberal Christian advocates of historical Jesus scholarship and conservative Christian literalists declaring that the Christian faith must be experienced cognitively. Such remarkable parallels between liberal and conservative approaches within contemporary Christianity are explored in the next section of this paper.
Chapter Three
The Drive for Intellectual Integrity

Inspired by academic biblical criticisms, many clergy and scholars have called for changes within the church, often advocating a need for liturgical and doctrinal changes relevant to a contemporary worldview. In other words, they have suggested that Christian beliefs mirror the empirical and scientific knowledge of congregants so that there will be no conflict between devotees’ religious beliefs and their temporal, secular experiences, enabling the religious practitioner to experience complete intellectual integrity between Sunday morning worship and secular routines the rest of the week.

The first chapter presented the modern notion of belief and the closely-related modern phenomenon of literalism. The second chapter laid out the development of Jesus scholarship, which has questioned and redefined much of the former understandings of who Jesus is and how the early church operated. In this present chapter I explore the effects of critical historical scholarship upon the modern scientific mindset (which Frye terms the “imaginative illiterate”), particularly with regard to religious activity.

Frye (1991) argues that, though individual integrity is a sign of a mature society, the isolated individual, “even when equipped with a conscience and a private judgement” remains a sleeping animal. Rather, individuality must be rooted in social conditioning and critical creativity (30). Those clergy members who articulate the need for Christian intellectual integrity share this opinion that community (the church) must maintain a role in sustaining humanity. Thus, religious leaders and scholars have sought to redefine Christianity in light of their present understanding of a scientific
worldview and new developments in biblical scholarship. In this section, I propose to explore the works of Bishop John Robinson and Pierre Berton as precursors to this movement. Then I examine contemporary examples of the movement, primarily in the theology of John Spong whose work stands as an example of the initial development of neo-literalism. While Spong may not be a full-blown neo-literalist, within his work one can decipher the roots of neo-literalism as extending from the movement for intellectual integrity.

1960s and the Introduction of Atheist Priests

One of the most notable early advocates for intellectual integrity was Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson, whose publication *Honest to God* (1963a) called for a “recasting of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms” including an insistence that “the most fundamental categories of our theology—of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself—must go into the melting” (9). Robinson’s book consists mostly of a practical “recasting” of the Christian faith following the theology of Tillich (Ground of Being), Bultmann (demythologizing) and Bonhoeffer (religionless Christianity). Elsewhere, Robinson declared that he hoped that his work would be seen as “a dialogue between religious man and secular man”, primarily to the “secular man [who] is just as much inside the church as out of it” (Robinson 1963b: 275).

In his review of *Honest to God* Alasdair MacIntyre explains that Bishop Robinson has attempted (and failed at) the impossible. He contends that Robinson is ultimately a conservative atheist, wondering whether this is the natural state for all of contemporary Protestant theology. MacIntyre suggests that theologians speak only to other theologians. Those who attempt to translate their message to the secular world must necessarily adopt the language of atheism. In summary, he states: “The
difficulty (or the problem) lies in the combination of atheism in the practice of the life of the vast majority, with the profession of either superstition of theism by the same majority. The creed of the English is that there is no God and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time” (1963: 227-228).

Robinson’s response is that the English are atheists with regard to the normative understanding of a theistic deity but that they do believe in God. Robinson therefore presents a means by which individuals might re-examine their beliefs and salvage their faith (Robinson 1963c: 229). Robinson insists that the Gospel must be presented within the secular mindset. Echoing Bultmann, Robinson calls for a “de-religionization” of Christianity but he allows for mythology, with the understanding that myths can be seen as true without asserting historical accuracy.10

In Canada, Pierre Berton (a well-known journalist and popular historian), on the invitation of the Anglican Church of Canada, conducted a similar call for intellectual integrity in his work, The Comfortable Pew: a Critical Look at Christianity and the Religious Establishment in the New Age (1965). Berton’s work was primarily concerned with social elements of churches, including their participation in social morality and policies since the First and Second World Wars. His greatest concern is that “Christian philosophy and ethic has been shackled by its institutional chains; that ‘religion’ as we know it today, in all its organizational manifestations, is something quite different from the Christianity of Galilee” (129).

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10 Robinson’s work opened up what could be called the “honesty-literature” trend. These works are concerned with making Christianity more accessible to the secularised Christian. Commencing with his wife’s article “Honest to Children” (1963) there has been many copy-cat titles including: Margaret Kennedy Knight’s Honest to Man: Christian Ethics Re-examined (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1974), Robert W. Funk’s Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium (1996), Geraint Iorwerth’s Honest to Goddess: Russia, Sophia and the Celtic Soul (Southampton: Crescent Books, 1998), and Jack Good’s The Dishonest Church (Scotts Valley, CA: Rising Star Press, 2003) among others.
Berton identifies a level of apathy present in Canadian churches, which he believed stemmed “from the wave of disillusionment that followed the misplaced idealism of World War One” (30). He criticises the Church for so adamantly declaring that “God was on our side” (30). Many of Berton’s concerns rise from the introduction of nuclear weapons and he criticises the church, which he feels either supported or remained silent regarding a multitude of issues, including the threat of nuclear war, racism, religious hierarchy, and others. Berton presents as a solution the need for “a violent revolution” (129), which he qualifies must be violent in the sense of the psychological and social. He quotes Robinson, stating that this revolution will help to create a “radically new mold and metamorphosis of Christian belief and practice” (Robinson in Berton 1965: 129).

Berton hopes in his work to explain the changes the church must undergo in order to survive. One of the most important changes for the church, according to Berton, must be a desire to see society revolutionised (142). Berton envisions a future church which is free of hierarchy, a theistic deity, biblical mythology, preaching and pulpits. Like many of those who call for intellectual integrity, Berton alludes to Christian love as the factor that must be salvaged from religion.

Read today, it can be seen that many of Berton’s moral and social objections have been addressed by churches. Berton’s work is interesting because those organisational components he suggests be eliminated still thrive in Church communities. His proposed solution as to how those elements should be removed stands as an ominous prophecy. Berton concludes his work by declaring that if change does occur in the church, “it is likely to come as the result of the actions of one man, of some spiritual genius, perhaps yet unborn, who will take all the incredible laws, postures, and myths of today’s Church and turn them inside out, so they have some
relevance in the New Age” (144). Do some of the contemporary clergy who have called for change envision themselves as assuming this messianic role?

Both Berton and Robinson operated during a time where there was a belief that secularisation was a strong threat to religion and that Christianity might disappear altogether. As Alister E. McGrath (2001) explains, the ideas presented by Robinson, Berton, the ‘Death of God’ movement and others became the driving force of theology in the 1960s: “most mainline Christian writers seem to have been swept along in the title wave of criticism. We must change or we shall die!” (18). McGrath, however, believes that the movement was merely caught up in the moment. He writes, “it is now clear that many of the more radical religious writings of the 1960s proposed agendas based on the unsustainable assumption that prevailing cultural trends were permanent changes in western culture” (18).

McGrath offers postmodernism as the alternative to the “postwar English-speaking” theology that had “created an unusable past for the Christian tradition” and offered a version of Christianity that was “(spiritually) bland and (intellectually) full of holes” (19). For McGrath, postmodern religion is represented by movements such as Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism and the growth of Christianity in Africa, Latin America and Asia. He does not however address the mainline traditions and their role, if any, in the future of Christianity.

The Christian Ultimatum: Change or Die

It seems that the mainline churches have continued to inherit the scholarship and the worldview of Robinson and Berton. This new generation has experienced a more pronounced separation (and perhaps even opposition) from both the secular world and the religious world; consequently, it is even more driven to articulate the
role of religion within the secular. Furthermore, the contemporary version of this movement sets itself up against mainstream American religiosity. Robert W. Funk (1996), for example, critical of what he calls “the anti-intellectual, know-nothing party”, explains that in his interactions with them, they,

seem not to be interested in whether I can read Greek, the original language of the gospels, whether I have had first hand experience in Palestinian archaeology, whether I have submitted my work to peer review in journals and books, whether I am quoted in the scholarly literature, or what my fields of specialization have been. . . . What counts is whether one can assent to orthodox propositions. Any hesitation on the scholar’s part brings on sudden hearing loss in the inquisitor (49).

Funk here clearly sets up the cognitive divide that is characteristic of this movement. There is a notion that, somehow, certain knowledge has been withheld from church congregations. John Spong, for example, is quick to remind his audience that the information that he is revealing is the same information that the listener’s parish priests have been taught in seminary. Spong and others seem to be implying that congregants should be suspicious of their clergy for withholding historical facts.

Contemporary contenders in the intellectual integrity movement are therefore more adamant that their scholarship be discussed within the church. John Shelby Spong (2005), for example, explains that he feels it is a necessity that the biblical criticism he encountered in seminary be presented to his parishioners. Discussing the adult education classes at his church, he writes:

I regarded those classes as my highest priority and prepared for them more rigorously than I prepared for anything else I did. If the people in my congregation did not want to drink from the fountain I was offering, there were plenty of other churches available from which they could choose. I never believed in tailoring the class to the security level of its members by hedging the truth. My aim was to challenge people with the insights of the scholars and to make contemporary biblical thinking available to them (10).
Furthermore, while their work often draws upon the theologies and philosophies that have shaped the modern western conscience they seem less likely to attribute theories to specific individuals. As noted above, for example, Robinson is quick to explain exactly which elements progress from Bultmann, Tillich and others, whereas someone like Spong, while using the ideas of Tillich and Heidegger, does not attribute specific ideas to them.

It is difficult to determine why Spong and others fail to cite relevant sources. Perhaps they fear overwhelming their readers with complex philosophies and too many names. Or they may feel that these ideas have taken on an existence of their own as prevalent themes within the modern psyche. Luke Timothy Johnson (1993), for example, is critical of Spong’s “blithe disregard for historical reconstruction”, which Johnson suggests is in direct conflict with the works of critical scholars (457). Lloyd J. Averill (1991) suggests that this omission might stem from a desire to have his work perceived as ground-breaking. Averill notes that “Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Robinson, Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeekx–are listed in Spong’s bibliography, in spite of his assertion that ‘no one’ has done that work” (559). What is important here is the fact that any reader could–by reading the texts listed in the bibliography–discover the relevant sources to Spong’s theology, though he provides no other explicit acknowledgement of his indebtedness.

**Neo-Literalism**

Neo-literalism is distinguished from literalism (as discussed in my first chapter) because it denies any divine authority given to the texts. So, while for conservative literalists the Bible is seen as inerrant and infallible, for neo-literalists this is not the case. Neo-literalists, like fundamentalists, are often selective in the texts
they want to affirm. Both groups choose to emphasise those texts and passages that suit their contemporary worldviews. For example, a fundamentalist might choose to reject the Leviticus passage that insists that men cannot cut their hair,11 (explaining that the law should be viewed in context to the historical time period, or that Jesus has abolished these laws in the ‘new covenant’, or even that it is symbolic of the idea that one should view one’s body as holy). However, they continue to uphold the apparent prohibition of same-sex relationships in Leviticus that occurs a few verses later12 because it is an essential element of their conservative worldview.

Likewise, the neo-literalists choose to view certain passages as symbolic, usually those that are central elements of the Christian faith (such as the resurrection) and will advocate a metaphorical approach to reading those texts. However, they apply a literalist reading and reject those passages that have no place in their liberal worldview (such as the above-mentioned passage regarding same-sex relations, which could easily be contextualised and rejected through a more scholarly approach).

Spong’s recent works13 have dealt with his desire to actualise a “new reformation” within the church. Following Robinson, he advocates the removal of a theistic deity, promoting a Christianity that is in accord with the secular mindset. Most important to my discussion, Spong’s work promotes the possibility of approaching

11 Leviticus 19:27: “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard” (NRSV).

12 Leviticus 20: 13: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” (NRSV).

biblical texts in such a way that one might support or reject specific passages according to one’s own opinion. Naturally, Spong believes that this process of elimination or inclusion be guided by contemporary scientific understandings of the world and biblical scholarship (such as those passages that are regarded authentic by the Jesus Seminar).

Spong also expresses the idea that a rejection–or an amendment–is warranted in those passages that do not fit his liberal understandings of Christianity. For example, Johnson points out that Spong, in his *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (1992), does not simply reject the virgin birth as scientifically unlikely (attributed to a common Hellenistic theme of divine heroes with exceptional births) or suggest that the origins of Jesus’ conception are unknown. Instead, Spong creates his own “therapeutic rereading” in which Jesus’ mother is presented as a victim of rape. The church, in its failure to recognise this version, is said to be responsible for centuries of oppression toward women (Johnson 1993: 457). Elsewhere in the same work Spong suggests that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that the wedding at Cana was Jesus’ own.

According to Johnson, these examples illustrate that “Spong is not truly interested in ‘what really happened’. His interest is in freeing Christianity from its dogmatic entanglements” (457). Johnson’s concern is, of course, guided by his own conservative Christian background.\(^\text{14}\) Regardless, he identifies an important element in Spong’s Christianity: “He remains defined by the literalism he so strenuously battles, and his vaunted ‘liberalism’ is one confined by a tired rationalism” (458).

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\(^{14}\) Raymond Martin (2000) includes Johnson as one of the primary advocates for the ‘Only Faith’ approach discerning the historical Jesus; a position which rejects “secular scholarship whenever it contradicts the claims of religious faith” (191).
Here Johnson identifies the key characteristic of the movement I am defining as neo-literalism. Neo-literalists, though their motivations and results are quite different from those of literalism, are still defined by the practice of reading texts literally—there is still a desire to seek out the truth behind the texts. For example, while he rejects the idea that Mary was a virgin, Spong still searches for an explanation for how Mary came to be impregnated. Likewise, because he can’t fathom the idea that Jesus would not have been married—and possibly in an attempt to steer clear of Roman Catholic teachings about celibacy—Spong simply chooses the most frequently mentioned female in the Bible (Mary Magdalene) and declares her Jesus’ wife.\textsuperscript{15}

These examples provide insight into the neo-literalist mentality regarding scripture. Neo-literalists seem uncertain of what to do with the Christian Bible; while the text is not privileged as inerrant, it is granted special status. A truly objective historical reading of the above-mentioned conflict suggests that it is difficult to discern who Jesus’ mother was. Most historians agree that the birth narratives were later editions to the oral gospels—in reality probably little was known of Jesus’ familial history. But the privileged role of Mary within the traditions of the church makes it difficult for Spong simply to deny her existence. Spong’s neo-literalist reading, rejects the virgin birth but keeps the existence of Mary (and her claim to virginal status), incorporating a new “scientific” explanation for her claim—the message is rejected but the frameworks are retained.

\textsuperscript{15} It should be noted that both of these theories are grounded in traditions. The theory regarding Mary as a victim of rape stems from, among other sources, Celsus’s second-century anti-Christian polemics, which was revitalised by Jane Schaberg (1987: 165-169). Likewise the notion that Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife has been perpetrated as of late by Dan Brown’s presentation of a mediaeval myth in \textit{The Da Vinci Code} (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
This method serves a two-fold purpose. First, as Johnston points out, Spong’s creation of a rape story enables him to make political claims about the church and to differentiate his movement from the perceived historical abuses that Christianity permitted. Neo-literalists reject specific scriptural passages because literalist readings have been used to justify acts they do not agree with, such as slavery, war, child abuse, and ecological recklessness. Spong, in his most recent book, *The Sins of Scripture* (2005), provides contemporary and historical examples of ways in which scriptural passages have been “misused”. The term “sins of scripture” refers to “those terrible texts that have been quoted throughout Christian history to justify behaviour that is today universally recognized as evil” (18). Spong also attempts to contextualise the passages in terms of their original societal meanings and to logically disprove their relevance for today. He divides his work into six topics (environment, women, homosexuality, children, anti-Semitism and certainty), each of which deals with the scriptural passages that he believes should be discarded.

Second, the neo-literalist method of rejecting or accepting passages provides a means for modern liberal Christians to affirm their affinity to the Bible. This process allows neo-literalists to include in their liturgy passages such as those directing Christians to “love thy neighbour as thyself” and to “forgive others their trespasses”. The question remains, however, why neo-literalists require (or desire) biblical directives regarding these and similar values? The special status granted to the Bible is potentially a generational trait. While a more detailed sociological study would be required, it seems that neo-literalists draw the majority of their membership from the generations prior to and including the baby-boom generation. Thus, a majority of their membership grew up in a time when church attendance was a fairly regular occurrence. However, the privileging of the Bible may also be attributed to the status
it has held within Christianity and the development of modern constructions of belief
(as discussed in chapter one).

The motivations for neo-literalism are understandable as manifestations of the
effects of modernity upon religion. As I have shown, contemporary Christianity is
marked by an emphasis upon belief as the definitive characteristic of religious
involvement. Thus theologians who have attempted to align Christian beliefs with an
empirical scientific worldview are often welcomed in liberal Christian denominations.
The movement for intellectual integrity within Christianity has allowed both laity and
clergy to confidently declare beliefs in light of scientific and hermeneutical
revelations. Writers such as Berton and Robinson allowed Christians openly to
declare that they did not believe certain traditional elements of the Christian tradition
without having to abandon their membership or belief in the church.

Apparently neo-literalism has emerged in response to a literal society, which
Northrop Frye terms the ‘imaginative illiterate’, in which scientific and biblical
teachings are interpreted as either true or false. Though there are counter-movements,
such as that of metaphorical theology, which promote an alternative approach, much
of the discourse has been inherited from a literalist reading of texts. We must keep in
mind, though, that both literalists and neo-literalists are selective in which passages
they choose to approach in this manner. For neo-literalists there are elements of the
Bible that, for a variety of reasons, they understand as symbolic or metaphorical (such
as the resurrection). I have suggested that these passages are viewed this way because
they affirm an important component of the community’s religious experience. For
example, a neo-literalist, while rejecting the physical resurrection of Jesus, will affirm
its symbolic significance because Jesus was so unique, or his influence so powerful as
a rabbi, that his disciples interpreted it to be “as if” he rose from the dead.
However, there are those within the movement who would reject even this symbolic interpretation. Gretta Vosper, for example, believes that the special status allocated to Jesus must be eliminated. Because Jesus’ actions and words do not always align with Vosper’s worldview (both in terms of her moral and scientific reality) she feels that cannot ascribe divine attributes to him. Neo-literalists are concerned that if they fail to reject those elements of the Bible not conforming to contemporary scientific worldviews then the church will not remain relevant. For example, Spong (2001) writes of a necessary second reformation which “proclaims that the way Christianity has traditionally been formulated no longer has credibility” (8). This approach, however, raises the question of how and why neo-literalists continue to utilise historic Christian norms of authority for their theological and religious expression. In my final section I propose to examine the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, a community, that possesses a heightened concerned for conforming to the secular worldview.
A growing movement in the churches has come to be known as “believers in exile”—those who no longer feel comfortable in contemporary church settings and who feel that the church as an institution is not equipped to address issues relevant to religion in the twenty-first century. This movement includes church leaders and scholars calling for a new reformation and attempting to redefine the tenets of Christianity. Many of the individuals who have answered this call are declaring themselves “Progressive Christians”.

Progressive Christianity (a movement that views itself as a “church within a church”), is in this chapter explored in its Canadian context, as a representation of the neo-literalism discussed in chapter three. Progressive Christians accept the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar, Borg, Spong and others. Accordingly, they actively reinterpret and reject elements of biblical texts and liturgies that do not suit their needs. In this chapter I set forth, first, the history of Progressive Christianity and its major teachings and introduce the divide between the Canadian (which I suggest represents a neo-literalist movement) and American networks.

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16 Progressive Christianity, like many other liberal religious organisations, is reluctant to make any wide generalizations or exact declarations of belief. My research draws heavily upon the statements made by affiliates or board members but should be tempered by the fact that they rarely intend to speak on behalf of the movement as a whole. For example, the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity defines itself by stating what it isn’t. Their website explains, “if you are searching for the security of rigid answers to the BIG questions of life, this isn't the right site for you”. Instead, it offers would-be readers a “safe place to explore those questions with others . . . a place where every idea, concept, ritual, and belief can be examined, where that which keeps us from living life freely and fully can be set aside, and where that which is worthy of our highest ideals can be upheld and celebrated”.

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Progressive Christianity in the United States

The Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) was founded in 1996 by Jim Adams, the former rector of St. Mark’s Episcopalian Church in Washington. Prior to founding The Center for Progressive Christianity he wrote two books, *So You Think You’re Not Religious?: A Thinking Person’s Guide to Church* (1989) and *So You Can’t Stand Evangelism: A Thinking Person’s Guide to Church Growth* (1994). These works serve as a valuable tool for evaluating the core beliefs and goals Adams and his original congregation established. The books suggest that the survival of churches is dependent upon new understandings and revelations. They appeal to the need for agnostics and sceptics to join the church in order to bring new ideas and questions to the forefront. Furthermore, they suggest that churches need to actively court agnostics and sceptics and need to rearrange their services and their self-identity in order ensure the comfort of these individuals.

Progressive Christianity was established in order to form a network of churches with similar beliefs and questions. The network also aimed to provide a list of communities (or lacking that, a list of affiliates who likewise feel themselves to be Progressive Christians) to individuals searching for a church in which to explore their issues. Since then there have been four other national centres founded–in Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia and most recently the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity (CCPC). In order to affiliate with The Center for Progressive Christianity, churches and organisations are asked to examine and complete a thorough study of the eight points, which, according to their website, represents “TCPC's working ‘definition’ of Progressive Christianity that outlines the kind of
welcome TCPC advocates” (TCPC, how to affiliate). Though West Hill and the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity do not place an emphasis upon the eight points, described by Vosper (2005) as more liberal than progressive (3), it is still worthwhile to examine them as a means of better understanding the movement.

Adam’s vision of Progressive Christianity begins with the assumption that church attendance is a favourable thing and the affirmation that the life and attributed teachings of Jesus act as means through which one might better explore one’s faith experience. The group’s core beliefs are outlined in what they call the eight points. These serve to define what the organisation means when it calls itself “progressive” and to explicitly align itself with Christianity. Understanding the implications of these points is essential to the comprehension of Progressive Christianity:

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who:

1. Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus;
2. Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us;
3. Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus's name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples;
4. Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to): believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning sceptics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and abilities, those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
5. Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe;
6. Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes;
7. Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers;
8. Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege


These points serve to define Progressive Christianity as unique from other liberal groups, such as Unitarians, in that it clearly declares a specific Christian path
for its organisation. This is most clearly articulated in the first point, in which they indicate that it is through Jesus they have found an approach to God.\textsuperscript{17}

Points three and four, more interestingly represent an important element of Progressive Christianity, namely the desire to see their church as a meeting place for people of many different faith groups with a special emphasis placed upon agnostics and sceptics. This inclusiveness goes beyond that of other liberal communities. Progressive Christianity is marked by its concern for the secular world, as theologian Lloyd Geering has pointed out. The movement is distinct, as one of those “groups of concerned people around the world [who] wish to acknowledge the legitimacy of the modern secular world but at the same time to stress the values it has inherited from the past and may be in danger of losing” (Geering 2004). This ability to exist amid both the secular and sacred worlds is a source of pride for Progressive Christians.

\textbf{A Question of Definitions and Organisation}

Religious progressivism is often confused with activist movements such as the Social gospel or Liberation Theology. Gary Dorrien (2001), for example, uses the term “progressivism” interchangeably with “liberalism” and traces its roots from the Unitarians through to the Social gospel movement. Others have attempted to incorporate progressive themes into their established theologies.

\textsuperscript{17} This point is a revised version of an early version in which they declared we “proclaim Jesus Christ as our Gate to the realm of God” (TCPC, the eight points). The use of the word “gate” here was intentional in that it refers to a specific metaphor attributed to Jesus, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:9, NRSV). The term “gate” also serves to suggest movement, transition or change, employing a metaphor they hope is free from the doctrinal “saviour” language of traditional Christian creeds. Regardless, this first point firmly establishes the importance of the person and attributed teachings of Jesus to the group. The group’s willingness to redefine the eight points is also of interest because it provides evidence of progressive Christianity’s desire to appear accessible to those within and outside of the Christian tradition.
In a CBC radio interview with Mary Hynes, Alan Jones, the dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, describes his theology as “Traditional-Progressive Christianity”. By adding “traditional” he indicates that he desires to be seen as someone with a progressive perspective while appealing to the traditions established in the liturgy and rituals of the Anglican Church. Jones takes a perspective resembling progressivism and explains that for him, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but rather is certainty. Faith, according to his perspective, includes doubt, whereas certainty is indicative of knowing everything and having no need for faith.

In his discussion of liberal Christianity, Jones explains that he assumes the position of traditional progressive theology, “because I don’t want to give up all that wonderful human experience from the past” (2005). He argues that the progressive and liberal practice of updating the creeds to be as ridiculous as updating Hamlet: “the notion that you can suddenly then have a modern form which fits everybody just isn’t true because people’s consciousnesses are at different levels. You need the richness of tradition” (Jones 2005). Jones’ understanding of traditional-progressive religiosity is typical of those people who Vosper believes would be uncomfortable in her progressive church. Vosper indicates that individuals who place an emphasis upon the extrinsic elements of religions would feel a sense of loss: “those for whom the forms, the rituals, the gowning, the well-loved hymns, are the way that they can access the divine or get in touch with their spiritual selves, they will miss that in a progressive congregation” (Vosper, 6).

In England, a large component of the progressive Christianity network is a movement known as Radical Christianity. Don Cupitt, often credited as the founder of this movement, draws similar distinctions between liberal and radical Christianity. Cupitt (1998) indicates that while liberals and radicals have many similarities,
ultimately they will “find their paths diverging sharply . . . soon the radicals realise that liberals are at heart even more conservative, in that they are more content with the cosmic status quo, than are the conservatives themselves” (166). Like Vosper’s view of liberal theology, Cupitt finds their vision of a theistic deity to be psychologically damaging (168). Cupitt sets forth a new vision of the church, articulated in movements such as The Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield, England and The Sea of Faith Network (which like Progressive Christianity exists primarily as a virtual network of affiliates).

The recent appearance of Progressive Christianity in Canada makes it difficult to determine the movement’s effect upon the Canadian Christian landscape. Vosper (2005), however, envisions its future in Canada as one that “can become influential in terms of creating a values base for our children, our communities, for our government” (12). Ultimately she hopes that Progressive Christianity will be an influential element within Christianity and secular society.

**Progressive Christianity in Canada**

The formation of the Centre for Progressive Christianity in Canada is credited to Tom Harpur (Anglican author and journalist for the *Toronto Star*) and West Hill United Church in Scarborough, Ontario. West Hill’s exploration of Progressive Christianity began when the United Church of Canada began the process of designing a faith statement (Vosper 2005: 13). Anxious that the United Church would not develop a statement that was radical enough, the congregation decided to form its own, modelled after those statements of values produced by other groups: The Center for Progressive Christianity, John Spong, Sea of Faith and the Unitarians (2). Interestingly the group initially rejected The Center for Progressive Christianity’s
eight points and the concept of affiliation because they found it too conservative and Jesus-centric. However, in the fall of 2003, Tom Harpur mentioned The Center for Progressive Christianity in his column, declaring Progressive Christianity “an innovative and potentially powerful movement afoot that is committed to a vision of a new kind of church” (Harpur 2003).

Harpur’s article mentioned progressive communities in British Columbia, Alberta and New Brunswick and explained that there were no progressive churches in Ontario and only sixteen individual affiliates in the Toronto area. Prompted by Harpur’s article, West Hill contacted James Adams and asked if it was possible to affiliate with The Center for Progressive Christianity without ascribing to the eight points.

From the very beginning Progressive Christianity in Canada attempted to forge its own identity as separate from its more conservative and traditional parent network. In part the structure of the United Church of Canada and in part the progressive theology already present among West Hill United’s congregants accounts for this distinctiveness. According to an article in the United Church’s magazine, The Observer, West Hill’s transformation began in the year 2000 when Vosper—who was up until that point attempting to meet the needs of both progressive and evangelical parishioners—preached a sermon in which she “clearly stated she doesn’t believe that God intervenes in our lives” (McPhee 2005: 16). Vosper, however, indicates that her congregation’s progressive theology precedes her own ministry at West Hill. She credits her predecessors and the presence of a book-study group for two decades with creating an atmosphere in which progressive ideas were able to percolate throughout

18 St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church, Maple Ridge, BC; New Westminster United Church, BC; Robertson-Wesley United Church, Edmonton, AB; and The Christian Vegetarian Association, Harvey, NB (Harpur, 2003).
the congregation (Vosper 2005: 13). Though not directly involved with the book-study group, Vosper indicates that since her arrival she has witnessed a change in which the discussions and ideas debated in the Friday night studies have affected the Sunday morning services.

**Progressive Christians as Neo-literalists**

The United Church of Canada’s attempt to compose a statement of faith led to the desire among West Hill’s parishioners to create their own statement. Vosper indicates this act forced the community to clearly examine and articulate their beliefs and values, resulting in an accelerated move toward becoming a progressive church. West Hill’s document focussed upon values rather than faith. Vosper is quick to defend the statement, concerned that their community not be perceived as one with negative beliefs:

> we worked hard to make it not a negative document. I mean, everybody wanted it to say, ‘well I think it should be in there that we don’t believe in the Bible as the literal word of God . . . we don’t believe this and we don’t believe that.’ We wanted it to be what we do affirm and how we want to believe. We recognise that up until Constantine you were recognised as a Christian by what you did and how you lived and what your choices were (2005: 13).

In a sense Vosper is advocating a return to this vision of pre-Constantine Christianity but West Hill’s theology seems to go beyond a simplistic return to a first-century style Christian community.

West Hill United Church is aware that they are acting within a time of transformation. Vosper explains: “These are bold people and they’re people who are very engaged. A lot of them have turned their participation in the community of faith into significant life work” (16). She maintains that the church recognises a desire to
see each person become a spiritual resource for the community and to break the boundaries of the definition of church.

Gretta Vosper begins her definition of Progressive Christianity by explaining there really is no such thing in the sense of a fixed entity; rather, she explains, there are many perspectives on Christianity, of which a progressive perspective is but one. This notion of a perspective allows Vosper to continuously reinterpret the progressive stance. She explains,

when I speak about a progressive perspective on Christianity, it is a perspective that is critical in its approach to scholarship, intellectually rigorous, that is open to interpretation and questions from sources. One of its primary beliefs is recognition that the Bible and indeed all of religion is humanly constructed, that it is not a divine construction, and so those things which are based upon it are therefore based upon a human and therefore fallible document (1).

For Vosper, this translates into a new approach toward doctrines and authority. She asks, “Who was privileged in the development of that doctrine?” and “Whose authority was maintained or created through the development of it?” (1). It is in answering these questions that Progressive Christians are better able to understand how the church came to assume the roles and beliefs that it now possesses and which of these need to be challenged or eliminated.

Elsewhere, Vosper has declared that the movement represents “practical reality to the words being penned by scholars” (2004). It is an attempt to articulate and remove the problems that have been exposed in the works of religious scholars. Vosper identifies that this challenge begins with the publication of Bishop John Robertson’s book, Honest to God, through the formation of the Jesus Seminar to the present-day works of Marcus Borg, Karen Armstrong, Tom Harpur, Don Cupitt, John Spong and others. Though these authors are known for calling for intellectual integrity and a new vision of the church, they provide little if any guidance as to how the
church should proceed. Progressive Christianity represents the practical application of these theologies.

It is important to note that Progressive Christianity sees itself as distinct from liberal Christianity. A 1998 article in the Anglican Journal differentiates the movement from liberal Christianity in that it places an emphasis upon inclusiveness and offers a venue in which, “one could be oneself without apology or explanation. Even those with conservative opinions were welcome” (Sandys-Wunsch 1998). Likewise, Vosper differentiates between the two by explaining that liberals tend to be more traditionalistic in their understanding of their religious practices. She explains, “the people in those congregations will use the language metaphorically” (2005: 2). A metaphorical understanding is not a problem within a specific community but, rather, this symbolic view creates confusion for outsiders:

if somebody walks in off the street who hasn’t been indoctrinated into that new metaphoric understanding of everything, they’ll still just think, ‘oh my God! Do they really believe this? Do I have to believe it? Do I have to come to believe it in order to be part of this community?’ (2).

Rather, Vosper indicates that an outsider would find a progressive church to be more accessible in terms of the rituals they re-enact and the liturgy they profess, neither of which would indicate concern or belief regarding a theistic deity.

Vosper’s comments here provide insight into what I think is an important element of Progressive Christianity’s neo-literalist mindset–an insistence upon accessibility. Inspired by a heightened concern for outsiders they feel the need to eliminate texts and liturgies that are not literally in line with a secular, liberal worldview.

In order to clarify their approach to scripture, Progressive Christians at West Hill United often rewrite scripture events so that they more accurately fit the
understandings and beliefs the community wishes to affirm. For example, the community has rejected the Lord’s Prayer and has replaced it with a modified version of The Prayer of St. Francis (14).

They’ve also attempted to move away from the Jesus-centric understanding of Progressive Christianity expressed by their American counterpart. In doing so, the organisation has recently crafted its own version of the eight points clearly indicating their commitment to moving away from a ritualistic, ecclesiastical approach to religion:

A progressive approach to Christianity challenges us to a life affirming, life enhancing and life challenging view of faith as reflected in those aspects of the teaching of Jesus and others that:

1. affirm the spiritual dimension of life inherent in all
2. adhere to a value based faith with love as the supreme value
3. acknowledge the human construction of religion and the freedom and responsibility to reconstruct it
4. draw from diverse sources of wisdom and employ critical thinking
5. communicate using relevant, ordinary language that embraces everyone
6. engage in inclusive, meaningful practices and ritual
7. participate in open, non-hierarchical community
8. commit to ongoing personal and community growth

(8 points draft, CCPC, March 12th, 2005)

Absent from these points is reference to the tradition of the church and, while Jesus is credited with teaching such values, it is recognised that he is not the only one. West Hill regularly includes readings from other faith traditions, philosophies or from literary sources (Scrivener 2004: 3). According to Vosper, Progressive Christians don’t hold the view that Jesus was exclusively the divine son of God. They freely peruse scriptures and recognise that there are perspectives which support their view and those which do not (9).

Vosper acknowledges that Christology is one of the most difficult challenges in assuming a progressive position for those who were raised within a church community: “they still want him to be special somehow. Even if he’s not divine, he
was special, and he was special for them growing up and so it’s hard to take him
down from that sort of exalted position and line him up with a bunch of ordinary
people” (9). But according to Vosper, radical revision of the understanding of the
nature and work of Jesus is an essential component of the progressive perspective
because once Jesus is removed from his exalted position individuals might achieve
what he achieved, and articulate those values they believe to be in line with the
progressive perspective.

**Evangelism and Affiliation**

Progressive Christianity stands as both a product of, and a reaction to, this
denominational mindset. H. R. Niebuhr found that denominations were a
distinguishing mark of American religious practices and criticised them as
manifestations of historical divisions among class, wealth, nationality and ethnicity
(McGrath 2002: 41). The movement arose out the Episcopal Church, but taking a cue
from contemporary evangelical practices it refused to align itself with any specific
denomination. Rather, Progressive Christianity invited congregations, church
organisations and individuals to become affiliates with the movement.

Those who affiliate with Progressive Christianity represent a resistant
component among what Spong calls “believers in exile”. As Alister McGrath argues,
the theology of the church as a “community in exile” represents sentiments that are
“deeply embedded in the Christian psyche” and have been for centuries (70). Today’s
“exiles” fear that they have lost all hope of finding a place within traditions of the
Church. Progressive Christians exist as both members and resisters of this movement.
Though alienated from their faith communities, they remain within the church and
hope for change rather than leaving. This stance is in line with Don Cupitt’s
understanding of the role of radicals within the church. He suggests that rather than leave the church and exist as “believers in exile” it would be more effectual for radical Christians to work with the languages they have inherited from their denominations to reinterpret traditions and bring about change (1989: 125).

Furthermore, Progressive Christianity is a movement aimed not only at “exiled believers” but also toward sceptics and agnostics. As noted above, accessibility to outsiders is extremely important to Progressive Christianity. Adams writes, “it is a tragedy that many honest skeptics do not realize that they can find resources in the church to help them live more meaningful and effective lives without having to sacrifice their intellectual integrity” (1989: 2). As discussed in my first chapter, Adams believes that faith is simply one of several manifestations of the Spirit, not necessarily a gift received by everyone (32). For Adams faith can no longer be the determining factor in one’s religious activity.

Part of the role of the Centre for Progressive Christianity is to address what then might serve as the determining elements of religious activity. Adams is convinced that the church is of value to sceptics by providing an outlet to explore meaning, in a tradition whose explorations have often been curtailed. In addition, Adams wants churches to provide a means of celebrating and marking cornerstones in one’s life with appropriately prescribed rituals as well as providing a community for those who are lost and lonely in modern urban society.

Vosper explains that, ultimately, they hope to bring the church to a state where there will be no differentiation in the understandings of sceptics and believers:

My hope is that eventually religion will get beyond the point where there are things that we have to question so significantly and we can talk about values that people don’t question because they are fundamental . . . Sceptics are sceptical about religious tradition and religious doctrine and the presentation of it, and the ecclesial structure that supports it, and I’m hoping that we can get beyond that eventually (2005: 5).
She appears to be uncomfortable with the idea of evangelism as a means of conversion, expressing instead a hope that evangelism would serve to introduce values and attitudes standing in opposition to the culture of materialism, individualistic negativity and oppression in contemporary society.

**Canadian versus American Progressive Christianity**

As I have shown, whereas elsewhere Progressive Christianity has emerged as a product of the Episcopalian Church or the Church of England, in Canada it has materialised from the United Church. Though it might be premature to distinguish between the two, I argue that Progressive Christianity in Canada represents a movement that will come to see itself as distinct due to its evolution from the United Church. Furthermore, I argue that the pronounced national characteristics of each denomination led to the development of progressive tendencies in each church. Below I discuss the characteristics of each church, indicating which attributes created the circumstances in which Progressive Christianity took root.

Bryan Hillis (1991) notes that “ever since its arrival on the eastern seaboard early in the eighteenth century, American Anglicanism has wrestled with the problem of its identity” (99). This problem was magnified after the American Revolution, resulting in a sense of fragmentation and distance from its mother church, the Church of England. The following years right to the present witnessed multitude divisions and schisms between the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (PECUSA) and dissenting sects. When a group of Low Church Anglicans formed

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19 The Anglicans Online website has a substantial list of Anglican churches who are not in communion with the World Wide Anglican communion <http://www.anglicansonline.org/communion/nic.html>.
the Reformed Episcopal Church in 1873, PECUSA responded by adopting the canon “that enabled conflicting views and tradition to live together in a measure of tolerance” (101). Hillis explains that theologians such as W. Norman Pittenger “refer to this doctrinal tolerance or inclusiveness as Anglican ‘comprehensiveness’ since all theological traditions are accorded equal standing” (101). Rather than seeing themselves as connected through doctrinal understanding, Episcopalians are connected through their shared liturgy and rituals as specified in the Book of Common Prayer.

This vision of “equal standing” allowed for the development within PECUSA of liberal theologies such as those proposed by Bishop James Pike, Bishop John Spong and ultimately Rev. Jim Adams. While there is no denying that Episcopalians are adamant traditionalists, their disassociation from the mother church and their lack of doctrinal affinity allowed for the climate in which Progressive Christianity could emerge.

In Canada, the Anglican Church has simply not experienced this same sense of fragmentation. As Robert Choquette (2004) explains, “[until] the mid-nineteenth century, the Church of England in Canada was simply a colonial extension of the mother church from which it received its doctrinal and administrative marching orders” (211). And while there was discord between Upper and Lower church traditions, following the formation of autonomous Canadian church provinces, there was still a sentiment of connection to the Church of England. Choquette further credits the teachings of Bishop Strachan (1778-1867) with cementing the emphasis upon the High Church and traditional Anglicanism in Canada’s Anglican churches (215-6).
In a recent workshop in Ontario with the Trent-Durham Anglican diocese, for example, Vosper was taken aback to discover how preliminary their understanding of progressive issues was: “it was their first introduction to thought and ideas and several of them after the workshop said, ‘I didn’t know anyone else thought this way’” (4). While these may be isolated incidents, and while many of the affiliates, including board members of Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, are members of the Anglican Church of Canada, it has not created an environment conducive to the emergence of a progressive perspective within the Anglican tradition. Rather, the United Church of Canada, a product of the merging of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalists, has a history of being well-versed in the experience of disassociation from mother churches. Like the Episcopal church, the United Church was forced to redefine its theology and able to do so in light of contemporary events.

Reginald Bibby (2002) notes that in the 1980s, the United Church of Canada was often criticised for its emphasis upon issues of social justice and the debate over the ordination of gays and lesbians, at the expense of spiritual needs (21). However, Bibby suggests that the “core of staunch supporters, an enviable pool of affiliates, a rich tradition and young and upcoming leaders who are determined to see congregations flourish” (233) have maintained the church in light of these criticisms.

Vosper implies that she feels that they are making up for lost time. Their affiliation with the Center for Progressive Christianity is seen more as a starting point than a point of arrival. As mentioned above, the Canadian Centre finds its American compatriots to be not progressive or radical enough. Whereas in the United States, membership within a church community is more or less expected, the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity operates within a religious landscape where
church affiliation and attendance has declined to a greater extent. Thus, the Canadian Centre’s affiliation with The Center for Progressive Christianity stands as a way of maintaining acceptability while still appealing to those who desire a more radical version of Christianity. Vosper explains, “We recognised that we’ll be dismissed as irrelevant if we’re too far out there and people don’t recognise us anymore” (3). Their activity within congregations is seen as one aspect of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, but Vosper hopes ultimately to develop networks for those who are apart from the church (2005: 3, 10).

While she believes that “congregations and churches are extremely important in articulating values and supporting the pursuit of those values” (11), she also recognises that the Sunday morning structure of the church has become irrelevant to many people’s lives and furthermore articulates that they are celebrating an experience of spirituality accessible outside of the actual church structure. Although Vosper is uncertain whether the church will survive with its Sunday morning schedule, its current structure seems to serve the transitional needs of Progressive Christianity. Again, Vosper indicates that study of biblical texts, theology and religious history is essential to those raised in the church, in order to overcome their misunderstandings and biases.

Both The Center for Progressive Christianity and the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity have lists of authors who write from a progressive perspective on their website. American Progressive Christianity places a strong emphasis on study and discussion groups, as well as times of reflection and sharing about one’s spiritual journey. Larger events such as conferences are held on an annual basis, inviting various scholars and theologians to reflect on a variety of topics, including historicity of Biblical texts, religion and art, evangelism and others.
Studying and questioning are part of the “costs” James Adams explains are essential to membership in a progressive church (1994: 37). Church members are not allowed simply to show up; they are required to participate, intellectually and through a commitment of both time and money.

Progressive Christianity in Canada, then, represents a distinct movement that is far more radical than its American counterpart. This difference may be attributed to the fact that the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity originated within a United Church congregation as opposed to the American version, which took root in an Episcopalian Church. The structure and beliefs of these respective organisations illustrate the similarities and the differences of these manifestations of progressive Christianity.

Progressive Christianity stands therefore as representative of a movement that places an emphasis upon intellectual integrity and a neo-literalist approach to scripture. As Vosper has explained, Progressive Christianity is distinguished from liberal Christianity in its refusal to view outdated language as symbolic or metaphorical; rather, it advocates that any language that cannot be understood literally must be discarded. Elsewhere, Vosper has offered a characterisation of Progressive Christianity as a “practical reality to the words being penned by scholars” (2004). The relationship of Progressive Christianity to the insights and developments in the work of these scholars has been of primary interest to me.

Progressive Christianity represents an attempt to bridge the gap between academia and the church. The works of a specific community of writers and theologians (Marcus Borg, John Spong and Tom Harpur) have provided the means through which the laity are able to access a credible contemporary religious experience. Borg, Spong and Harpur do more than merely supply study materials for
the various progressive and radical networks. They also sit on honorary advisory
councils and serve as featured speakers at conferences—in fact, some have built a large
part of their careers out of speaking to and on behalf of Progressive Christians.

Because The Centre for Progressive Christianity in Canada is new, it is, as
Vosper indicates, still attempting to decipher who and what it consists of (2005: 3).
Progressive Christians and scholars like Spong, Cupitt, or Robinson, want to see the
Church, in some form, survive and grow. For James Adams this survival is ensured if
the churches are able to increase their ministry to sceptics and doubters. He insists that
they wish to attend church, but have been unable to find one that is clear about its
beliefs and practices. One way to assure such clarity is to adopt a neo-literalist stance.
Adams believes that people who have rejected religion are in reality the most religious
people:

> They are the most thoughtful about their religious position. They’ve
made a choice. And I think because they haven’t affiliated, there is
always the possibility that they may see the Church as companion in
their search for meaning. People who don’t think they’re religious still
have to make sense of their lives somehow. If people resign themselves
to a meaningless existence, they get depressed and unproductive. So
how you help people make sense out of nonsense is the Church’s task.
Some people want to do that by being told. They want to be certain
they’ve got the right answer, and other people find the search more
promising than the result (Adams in Rugen 1997).

Adams draws upon his own experiences, first, as a self-proclaimed sceptic and,
secondly, as a minister to doubters.

For Vosper, the survival of the church will materialise through a
reinterpretation of the meanings and of the church’s understanding of itself: “My hope
is that eventually religion will get beyond the point where there are things that we
have to question so significantly and we can talk about values that people don’t
question because they are fundamental” (5). Vosper’s view of the future church is
arguably quite different from the historical or contemporary church. Her vision, however, represents a movement of individuals whose ideas, questions, and explorations are being vocalised in church basements and fellowship halls across the country.
Conclusion

This study represents but one small component of a larger scholarly undertaking—namely, the changing dimensions of the modern worldview and the transformation regarding the ways that Christians approach their scripture. My major intention has been to set forth a study of Progressive Christianity in Canada (of which this may be the first) and to identify this movement as neo-literalist.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Northrop Frye maintain that many contemporary constructions of belief and literalistic approaches to reading the Bible are far from being ‘traditional;’ rather they are innovative recent phenomena. These approaches and methods have dramatically altered the ways in which Christian communities have operated. They have also served to redefine the modern discourses regarding religion in the secular world forcing both those who accept and those who reject a (conservative) literalistic outlook to adopt its language. Those for whom the literalistic approach is not relevant have attempted to align liturgical and doctrinal truths with secular realities, advocating intellectual integrity within the church. Neo-literalism has emerged as a response to the drive for intellectual integrity as reformers have approached scripture with a scientific (true or false) mindset.

Progressive Christianity has distinguished itself from other Christian movements because it attempts to recognise and amend the conflicts identified by scholars while retaining an awareness of the ways in which their liturgies and doctrines will be interpreted by outsiders. Unlike liberal communities who attempt to respond to the conflict between the Christian and scientific worldviews by presenting
a metaphorical understanding of scripture, Progressive Christianity simply rejects those elements of scripture that do not correspond to the scientific worldview.

Neo-literalism might ultimately prove to be a more difficult set of prescriptive guidelines than either literalism or the historical-metaphorical approach. It requires definite choices regarding what is acceptable and what must be eliminated; furthermore, it must appeal to an ever-changing modern worldview to justify its choices. It both attempts to appeal to a baby-boomer generation of Christians who feel marginalised or abandoned by the church while also placing its hope in the next generation, which has not been raised with the ideology that the church is special or that Christianity deserves to be saved. Despite (or perhaps because of) these characteristics it reflects a larger concern within the study of religion, forcing questions to be asked as to how religious communities deal with intellectual conflicts and why these conflicts emerged in the first place.

The question remains, however, why neo-literalists hold Christianity to such stringent conventions? As mentioned in the introduction, many other contemporary religious movements experience no such demand to bring their teachings into correspondence with a scientific worldview. While Christianity has in the past been more persistent than many other religions in its claims to absolute truth, this does not explain why neo-literalists within the tradition, who reject these claims of absolutism, still insist upon literalistic and absolutist readings. Vosper’s desire to see Christianity move past its discrepancies to a value-based faith might serve as a resolution to this conflict but Vosper’s solution raises the question, is it really Christianity?

The poet Keats defined what he called “Negative Capability” this way: that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats [1817] in Gittings 2002: 41). What,
then, is the motivation for this complete removal within religious experience and practice of all vestiges of cognitive dissonance? For Keats, “Negative Capability” was the ability to allow truth to remain unresolved; a quality that he felt was rare even among his own contemporaries. Today's religious affiliates are even less likely to possess the resources that would enable them to embrace “Negative Capability.” Religions have always thrived on counterintuitive representations; perhaps amendments are required, not within religious traditions (or Christianity), but to the theoretical constructs applied to religious consciousesses.

Modernity has pulled religion into the realm of intellect, but is this really its rightful place? Is intellectual integrity really the desired end of contemporary Christians? While it appears to be the case that humanity has inherited from the modern consciousness the imaginatively illiterate mindset, why does such a mindset infect all realms of existence, including, most paradoxically, that of religion?. What if, for example, Vosper were to employ a neo-literalist approach to love? Would her parishioners be obliged to remove all of the counter-intuitive elements in their discourse with families and friends?

When Berton and Robinson wrote in the 1960s they made bold declarations that theirs was a vision that would save the church. Today people like Spong and Vosper echo their claims, declaring that finally they have the solution that believers in exile have been awaiting. Reginald Bibby, notes in his work *Fragmented Gods* (1987) that in his discussions with inactive Anglicans, very few of them actually desired change. He writes:

If the inactives wanted to attend services more frequently, I guess they would. But from the cold standpoint of a “cost-benefit” analysis, most of the inactives were already getting an acceptable fragment return from the Church. The question “What would it take to bring you back?” was therefore fairly meaningless to many inactives; they are content with
things pretty much the way they are. It is perhaps analogous to asking people, “What would it take to get you to eat five meals a day?” and having them answer, “I don’t want to eat any more than three.” (135).

In the last analysis Progressive Christianity may find that its relentless revisioning of scriptures and doctrines does not achieve the desired effect. Spong and Vosper are appealing to an even more ambiguous audience than the one that Berton and Robinson petitioned. It is an audience that is far more suspicious of religious activity and far more comfortable checking “none” in the religion section of the census.

Progressive Christianity and neo-literalism are important because they invite scholars and contemporary Christians to redefine Christianity in general–and religious activity as a whole. The transformations that I cite may prove to be merely the newest uprising in a consistent tradition of dissent within religious movements. The themes explored here are central to this discussion. This present exploration serves as an introduction to a subject matter that demands that further research be conducted, especially in the fields of sociology and cognitive sciences. I believe (in the original sense of the word) that I have offered evidence of a practical theoretical discourse and field-study with which to begin this inquiry.
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