

# What Is Progressive Christianity?

By Jim Burklo

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”*

(Philippians 2: 5-7)

Progressive Christianity is a movement of people who emulate the humble faith of a humble man.

God is beyond our comprehension, no matter how much we know of the Divine. The One in the burning bush, who answers with "I AM" when we ask the source of the flame, transfixes us with wonder. "I AM" invites us to question and explore, and to doubt any assumptions we may develop about the Divine. Mysticism – the direct encounter of human beings with God – reduces us to awe.

The theology of hubris declares on the bumper sticker that "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Theologians and politicians declare that God is on their side, whatever side that may be. Some Christians revel in their spiritual superiority, waving their pride for all to see. Others are genuinely embarrassed that they just so happen to follow the only true religion. They act as if they have no choice but to make a claim that violates common sense and insults followers of other great faiths. How did the religion of an empty man become so full of itself?

Progressive Christianity empties itself, over and over, of any suggestion that our religion is better than others. Other spiritual or secular paths to the Divine may be as right for other people as ours appears to be for us. Humble religion doesn't focus on its walls, but rather on its openings. Progressive Christians try to keep our doors and windows open to inspirations that enter from beyond our communities of faith. Mystical spirituality keeps us open to progressive revelation, which strains our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hands to serve.

Progressive Christians embrace the humbling challenge of following a path that leads us to love not only our neighbors, not only strangers, but even enemies. The theology of humility is embodied in Jesus' statement that "the greatest among you shall be your servant." It's hard to be faithful when you put your trust in a mystery, when questions matter more than answers. It's a tough choice to become a servant. But then, is faith supposed to be easy?

What's the true test of Christian faith? Is it to accept that all, or even most, of the stories of the Bible are literally, factually true? The enormous success of the gambling industry proves that it's easy for people to believe the unbelievable. Now, there's nothing wrong with reading the miracles of Jesus as literal facts. Implausible things do happen sometimes. But why should such easy credulity be the price of admission to Christian faith? What if the true test is to love the unlovable? That's a very steep price for everyone to pay. It's a challenge vastly more worthwhile than simply believing in the fantastic. I fail at unconditional love all the time. But faith picks me up, dusts me off, and inspires me to try again to share compassion even

with those who annoy or persecute me. Progressive Christianity is a movement of people practicing a faith that asks hard things of us.

Progressive Christianity's most powerful "evangelism" tools are our willingness to empty ourselves of prideful claims to the ultimate truth, and our efforts to serve the common good of humanity.

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Dan, one of the members of my church, suffered a big health setback. He already had plenty of physical challenges before he went into kidney failure. But when I went to see him in the hospital, he said, with a smile on his face, "Jim, I'm in a medical decathlon. I'm entered in all the events! And I've decided to enthusiastically embrace the inevitable." He looked forward to reading good books while on dialysis for hours on end, three times a week. He was sorely tested, but he still had faith, inspiring all who visited him.

Dan has raw faith. It's not faith in a set of beliefs so much as it is a faithful approach to living. I think Jesus had raw faith, too. Jesus didn't base it on some delicate structure of dogma or belief in the historical factuality of certain events. His faith was a trust in his relationship with God, which led him to love and serve courageously.

Progressive Christianity takes the Bible seriously because it doesn't have to take it literally. The faith of Jesus doesn't depend on whether or not the resurrection was an historical fact. The story of the resurrection of Jesus is a powerful, life-changing myth that resonates with my faith, and inspires it. An important reason that it matters so much to me is that I don't have to accept it as fact.

What has more truth? The front page of the newspaper, which lists facts, or the story of the gospel, which consists largely of myth and poetry? I am convinced that you will find more truth in the gospel than in the newspaper. The gospel myth says that despite all the awful facts revealed in the headlines, despite the awful fact of the crosses on which human beings dangle in pain every day, life is very much worth living, and love is very much worth sharing. That is life-giving truth. Facts are important, but there is a truth that matters more than facts. Progressive Christianity, as the old saying goes, holds the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other.

Progressive Christianity pitches a big tent. There is plenty of room in it for those who read the gospels as fully historical accounts. Yet there are plenty of Christians who don't think Jesus literally rose from the dead, and find their faith strengthened because it has been liberated from dependence on implausible claims. Raw faith is the toughest kind. It enabled Jesus to face the otherwise frightful facts before him on the cross. It has enabled Dan to keep the faith while confined in a dialysis center.

*"For we walk by faith, not by sight,"* said St. Paul (2 Cor. 5: 7). Christian faith is a positive approach to life, a willingness to love and serve, despite or even because of visibly hopeless circumstances. It's the kind of faith that remains, even if angels

don't swoop down to rescue us when we are in trouble. It's the kind that gets us through the spiritual, financial, and medical decathlons into which we are entered.

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*"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.'" – Jesus (Matthew 17: 21)*

I once stood at the rim of an open-pit copper mine at Ajo, Arizona, and looked down at the dump trucks that carried the ore up from the bottom of the pit. These were trucks so big that they'd barely fit in two lanes of a highway. They were so far down in the pit that they looked like matchbox toys. That alone was an impressive sight, but then I learned that at one time, this vast, deep pit had been a mountain. The spot where I was standing would have been at the base of that mountain, and I'd have been looking up, instead of down.

The ore was dug, the mountain was flattened, and the miners kept digging until they inverted it into a hole, and the remains of the mountain and the hole were piled up into a long, flat-topped mountain of tailings about a mile away. Somebody said to the mountain: "Move from here to there," and it moved.

People had faith that they could make small machines that in turn could make larger machines that could make even larger factories to make even larger machines. And they had faith that these really large machines could dig and haul away huge rocks and move them someplace else. Humble faith on the scale of mustard seeds can move things on the scale of mountains.

But why stop with mountains? Why not start with the faith we have now, however weak, and take up challenges grander than copper mining - such as forgiving those who hurt us most? Hard as it was to carve that hole in the ground, and the pile of tailings near it, it is even more difficult to extend appropriate compassion and protection to the most vulnerable people in our midst. Why stop with mountains, when we have before us the challenge of creating a new world community based on trust and respect rather than on selfish interest and brute force? Why stop with mountains, when we could move to end poverty in America, a shame inexcusable in this richest land on earth? Why stop with mountains, when we have 45 million people without health insurance in America, and more are losing their coverage every day? It is a marvel to move a mountain by faith, and even more of a marvel when we faithfully and bravely dig into the depths of our souls to face the demons we find there, and work to heal ourselves and the world.

Progressive Christianity leverages the little faith we have today, to move more than mere mountains tomorrow.

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Billy Collins was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001-2003. Like many a Poet Laureate, he has spent a good deal of his life trying to teach people to

appreciate the medium. But a good deal of the time, he has found it frustrating, especially in his role as a college English professor. Very often, people want to know the one, exact, unequivocal meaning of a poem, when even the Poet Laureate is only dimly aware of the many potential interpretations that his own good work may hold. He experienced many instances of this frustration, and so he responded as good poets often do. He wrote a poem about it.

And it is one in which I find resonance with my own profession. Very often, people in churches want to know the one, exact, unequivocal meaning of a passage in the Bible. But the Bible consists largely of a sort of poetry. Few of its passages have any single, absolute meaning. Jesus himself understood this. He quoted the Hebrew scripture all the time. But he used it creatively, showing clearly that its passages had many potential meanings. He had no problem with freely, artfully applying scriptural images and stories to situations that had nothing to do with the contexts in which they appeared in the Torah and the prophets. He'd mix passages together, blending them freely, to get his points across. He did things with the scriptures that would get him turned down for ordination in a lot of Christian denominations today.

What would happen if we interpreted the New Testament as creatively and freely as Jesus interpreted the Hebrew scripture? First of all, we'd have some fun, and secondly, we'd discover that the Bible is a resource for us to use creatively to express our own spiritual experience, rather than being a rule-book full of clear answers.

So I present Billy Collins' original poem, and my adaptation of it, as invitations to liberation from literalism and to remind us of the fathomless potential meaning that we can find in the Bible.

#### INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Billy Collins (former poet laureate of the US)

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE  
--with thanks to Billy Collins!

I ask them to take the Bible  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into the Bible  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the Bible's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of the Bible  
waving at its many authors' names on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the Bible to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

Progressive Christians waterski across the gospels, waving happily at Matthew, Mark,  
Luke, and John as they stand, cheering us, along Galilee's shore.

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My wife Roberta and I took a stroll down the main street of Sausalito near the church  
and heard live music coming from the No Name Bar, so we leaned on its open  
windowsill and listened for a while. Al, the bar's owner, came out to the sidewalk to  
puff on a huge cigar, and we made his acquaintance. After a lot of friendly and funny  
banter, it came out that I was the minister of the church up the stairs. This surprised  
him.

"Sorry," he said, "but I don't believe in God!"

"So what?" I asked. "That isn't what matters. I don't think Christianity is about

believing things. I think it's about practicing compassion and experiencing spirituality."

"Then what is spirituality?" he asked.

"I'm not exactly sure myself – it's a fuzzy word," I answered, "but I aim to find out what it means!"

This was enough to inspire Al to make us his guests for drinks on the back patio, where we sat with a group of strangers and carried on a lively conversation about religion and lots else, late into the night.

Al and I had a lot in common in our understanding of God. The God he didn't believe in is the same God I don't believe in, either. He thought that made him an atheist, while I thought that made me a progressive Christian. Neither of us believed in a supernatural God who lives outside the universe and meddles in its affairs capriciously, showing favor to some and not to others. Neither of us believed in a God who expects us to believe unbelievable things or expects us to think one particular religion is right, to the exclusion of all others. Neither of us believed in a divine being who set up humans to "fall" and thus needed a bloody sacrifice to get right with him.

Instead of believing in God, I experience God. When I feel unconditional love from or for others, I experience God. When I am full of compassion for others and for the universe itself, when I feel compassion that comes from a Source beyond any one person or thing – then I experience God. When I am filled with awe and wonder as I encounter the natural world around me, I experience God. When I experience the kind of joyful hospitality that Al offered us that night, I experience God.

This experience is beyond any name I can give it. This is why the great religions of the world have always handled the name of God with great delicacy. All religions have poetic, mythical ways of saying that the experience of God cannot be contained or limited by the words we give to (him/her/it?). Each religion, in its own way, worships a God beyond naming.

At the No Name Bar, Al and I had a chat about the No Name God. The No Name God can be experienced in a saloon as well as in a sanctuary, on a sidewalk as well as in a pew, and by an "atheist" as well as a "believer". If Al could graciously offer a place for me at his table, the least I and other progressive Christians can do is to offer him, and others who disbelieve or question traditional religion, a place at our communion table.

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As I walked up a sidewalk in Berkeley, I heard a tree talk. A soft, high-pitched, plaintive voice came from its mouth. I stood and listened.

After a while, a little finch poked its beak out of the hole in the trunk of the sycamore, and then flew out. Its babies were still inside, blending their sounds into one sweet supplication.

I was taught in English class to avoid “pathetic fallacy”, the temptation to write human characteristics into non-human things. But really, the tree did talk. I was there, and I heard it.

As I stood there, listening, I mused that while the tree’s voice was that of birds inside a hole in its trunk, that didn’t mean the tree didn’t have a voice. There had once been a branch at that spot on the trunk: it fell or was cut off, and the wound festered with rot until a hole formed – an ideal habitat for finches to make a nest of little strands of grass and twigs. How different was my voice, really? My body is an ecosystem of diverse cells with very different shapes and functions. One set of cells found my voice-box to be an ideal habitat. Those cells formed a perfect nest of strands in my larynx, from which they issue a voice. They are as at home in my throat as the finches are in that sycamore trunk.

What I call my “self” is a congregation of billions of living beings, not one of which has any idea that they are part of me. Each cell is “nesting” among the others, relating symbiotically.

I serve a church community, and see myself clearly as part of its ecology of interdependence. Together our sounds blend into one voice that floats out the opened arched doors of our sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Because this wooden structure is our habitat for worship, it’s another example of trees that talk.

But I am only barely aware that I’m a constituent of another vastly larger entity called the human race. I add a tiny tone to a much larger voice, and I hardly know what it speaks, little more than those tiny baby finches could have known how their sounds would be synthesized into the voice of a tree.

But perhaps by listening to a talking sycamore, I might be trained to hear the voice of the human mega-being of which I am a micro-member. What are we saying? And is it what we really want to be saying?

But better yet, listening at the mouth of a tree, I might for a fleeting moment hear from it the voice of the One in whose throat all humanity is but one miniscule vibration, hardly louder than the peeping of baby finches in the springtime.

Progressive Christianity trains the ear to listen to talking trees.

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Progressive Christianity trains the eye to see what’s below the surface.

I walked along the Sausalito shoreline on a beautiful afternoon. There’s one stretch of marsh south of Schoonmaker Beach with a short-cut path around it that is sometimes partly covered in water. But this time, the tide was low and the path was clear. And out in the marsh, flotsam of boards and rusty iron was visible, coated in greenish-brown muck. The tide was so low that the secrets of the deep were revealed – an interesting sight, though not necessarily a pretty one! Shreds of broken dream boats, splintered planks from shattered harbors, anchors aweigh-ed no more.

Life at ebb tide reveals all that, and more. When contrary currents drain away your soul, you get a view of what lies at its bottom. You are confronted with memories and feelings that once you hoped would sink out of sight forever.

I have never suffered from anything close to a debilitating depression – knock on wood. I did, and I do, nothing to deserve my generally temperate disposition. I have my tides, but they are nothing like those in the Bay of Fundy in Canada, where the sea level rises and falls up to fifty feet. But every now and again, I wake up at 3 in the morning, when my tide is at its very lowest, and I get a taste of what depression might be like. At that hour, the ebbing tide of endorphins in my brain reveals a worry. And then a grudge. And then a bad memory. And then an unresolved conflict. And then a resentment. All are covered in greenish-brown muck. The best I can do is take deep breaths, observe my sad state as calmly and compassionately as I can, and try to remember that the tide will turn. Eventually I fall asleep again, positive brain chemistry quietly and imperceptibly flows back in, and I wake up, usually with a good attitude.

The same ebb and flow comes with the passages of my life. A few years ago I went through a family crisis that was, quite literally, a draining experience. And again, in my most drained moments, I noticed that I obsessed not only about the immediate causes of the crisis, but also about everything else that was wrong. When I'm drained by one thing, everything else lying at the bottom seems to come to the surface. But those are times when I'm least capable of dealing with them. When times are really good, as they are for me today, I am too busy enjoying life to want to clean up the bottom-dwelling problems that I see when I'm drained!

The best I can do is to take the role of the observer, looking with calm and care at the broken jetsam that emerges when the water level sinks. Prayer is like a hike along the shore of the soul, whether it's full of dancing waves, or drained to reveal the mud and the junk. The observer within me, and within us all, is God – the unbreakable pier, the boat that stays afloat – divinely attuned to the ebb and the flow of the heart.

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Progressive Christianity anchors the soul in order to free it.

Every Wednesday, our church hosts a free lunch for those in the community of Sausalito who need it. It's prepared and served by a team of volunteers from our church and neighboring congregations. I would refrain from calling it a "soup kitchen", because the food is better than that term might suggest. And I'd refrain from calling it a "homeless" program because almost all of those who come to the meal have some kind of home, even if it might not meet standard cultural expectations. Here in Sausalito, that standard is already stretched, because so many people live on boats tied to the docks along the water. These boats have electrical, water and sewer hookups to the docks.

But there is another group of boat dwellers - the "anchor-outs" - many of whom are regulars at our Wednesday meal. Their boats float away from the docks, anchored out in Richardson Bay (in some cases, tethered to buoys chained to old car engines

sunk at the bottom). 80-odd of these boats dot the water, and from them their dwellers venture to land on rubber rafts or rowboats to get food, water, and fuel. It is the last frontier of freedom in America – one of the last places a person can live on "the commons" without paying rent of any kind.

But even the freest of the free must be tied down somehow, tethered to an anchor so that their boats can stay afloat in the wild weather of winter, held close enough to land to get supplies. Some of these boat dwellers have very little income, and as a result our Wednesday meal is a welcome source both of physical and social nutrition. As I was eating at the lunch recently, I sat by two "anchor-outs" who were deliberating about what kind of marine plywood was the best for patching their boats.

In the early days of the Christian church, "anchorites" were people who withdrew from society and lived in seclusion to practice spiritual disciplines. Many of them subsisted on very sparse and simple fare, and lived in caves in the wilderness. They were free from the cares and trials of community life, but they were still "anchored" – tethered tightly to God through their prayerful meditations. Julian of Norwich was a 14th-century English "anchorite" - a lay woman who retreated from the world to pray and compose classic essays on Christian spirituality. "I can never have full rest nor true bliss," she wrote, "till I am so fastened to Him that there is no created thing between my God and me."

So often religion itself gets in the way between God and us. But without a spiritual tradition, we lose the common language and the rituals we need to express our souls' experience. Progressive Christianity aims to encourage the freedom for which we were created, while offering a needed link to the spiritual wisdom that has come before us.

Lest we get carried away with freedom, and go adrift and sink against life's rocky shoals, we drop anchor into God through the kind of spiritual practice that Julian described, a practice that "fastens" us to our Source and our Goal. The anchor can be public worship. It can be private prayer. It can be soul-centered journaling, writing, or artistry. It can be physical exercise that is focused on making our bodies into healthy temples where the Spirit can reside. It can be works of service that make us channels for the compassion that is God.

Progressive Christianity keeps the baby Jesus while throwing out the bilge-water of stifling theology and oppressive practices that have been done in his name. It is a movement to liberate the soul while offering a tether to the best that remains in our religious heritage.

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(A skit in worship: BUT speaks and withdraws from the communion table. AND speaks and approaches it.)

*"I love you – BUT your habits annoy me to distraction."*

*"I love you very much, AND because I do, I'd like to work with you on our mutually*

*annoying habits.”*

*“I love you – BUT you are too fat or too thin or too poor or too rich or too imperfect or too perfect for me.”*

*“I love you, AND I accept everything about you, AND I want to join you in growing and changing in positive ways.”*

*“I would help you with your problem, BUT I’m way too busy right now.”*

*“I’m busy with a project right now, AND when I’m done I will give you a hand.”*

*“When you get sick, our insurance will cover you, BUT if you lose your job because you are sick and can't pay for the insurance anymore, you will be uninsured and your assets will be wiped out.”*

*“Someday we'll all have health insurance when we get sick, AND we'll all stay insured if we lose our jobs because we're sick.”*

*“I’ll follow you, Jesus, BUT it's just too much to ask me to give up my status or my privilege or my comforts when following you leads to such sacrifices.”*

*“I’ll follow you, Jesus, AND that means I’m willing to risk it all for the sake of divine love. AND I hope you’ll be there for me when the going gets tough.”*

*“My religion is true, BUT yours will never lead to salvation. I’m going to heaven, BUT you’re going to hell.”*

*“My religion works for me, AND yours works for you. My religion AND your religion, working together, can bring heaven down to earth.”*

Progressive Christianity turns “buts” into “ands”.

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Progressive Christianity is a viable alternative to the dominant doctrinaire manifestation of the faith in America today. That wasn't true ten years ago, but now it is a rapidly growing movement. More and more churches, seminaries, and other organizations are going public with a progressive identity and an extravagant welcome to the millions of people who want to follow the way of Jesus, but have felt excluded from the church in the past. The term “progressive” as applied to Christianity and other faiths is now a well-used term in the vocabulary of the mass media – a new phenomenon emerging just in the past year or two.

The Center for Progressive Christianity, [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org), has for the past decade offered a succinct eight-point expression of this form of the faith. It was a corollary to the movements in liberal denominations to offer full affirmation and openness to gay and lesbian people, by extending welcome not only to sexual minorities but also to people

who can no longer accept traditional orthodoxy. A growing number of churches have affiliated with TCPC and adopted this statement for their congregations, empowering their members with language that they can use to describe the Christianity they seek to embody. The statement defines the faith by deeds much more than by creeds. Whether or not we do justice and works of compassion matters more than what we say we believe. The tcpc.org website is a hub for the whole movement, and through it, seekers and “exiles” can find churches and groups and events that will welcome them just as they are. It offers links to many other progressive Christian groups and resources all over the world, as well as news, reviews, blogs, and discussion boards. The movement is also manifested by regional “centers for contemporary theology” in cities around the country, where people gather for lecture series and other events to learn more about progressive faith.

There are other overlapping and sometimes contradictory definitions of this movement, existing harmoniously at present. The shock and awe among religious political liberals after the last presidential election, disturbed by the sudden ascendance of the Christian Right, gave rise to a host of new faith-based groups and coalitions. Most of these groups define “progressive Christianity” as a biblically-based social agenda promoting justice and peace, crossing the boundaries of evangelical and liberal theology. Theological and/or ecclesiastical conservatives who are politically progressive are now claiming a term that before was used primarily to describe theologically liberal people. It now appears that the political-social definition of “progressive Christianity” is more commonly used than the understanding embodied in TCPC’s eight-point welcome statement. A very important manifestation of this version of progressive Christianity, which has been functioning behind-the-scenes for the past two years, is Faith in Public Life - [www.faithinpubliclife.org](http://www.faithinpubliclife.org) – a coalition of many socially progressive religious groups that has concentrated their energy and influence in politics and the media.

But beyond these organizations, progressive Christianity is spreading wildly from the roots like crabgrass. More and more individual Christians are finding a voice, a language, to express their faith in terms that transcend the narrow doctrines and circumscribed social agendas of the Religious Right. They are no longer embarrassed to be Christians, because they have discovered they are not alone in leaving literalism, exclusivism, and chauvinism behind. They are finding friends everywhere who share their desire to be emptied, so they can be filled with Jesus’ good news of justice, peace, and radical welcome.