



# “Too many new stories! Which one do you tell?”

Dr Nigel Leaves

## WE ARE STORY TELLERS

Many claims have been made as to the true identity of human beings. Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) labeled us *homo religiosus*, Karl Marx (1818-1883) argued that humans were the product of their social relations, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) considered us to be essentially ‘sexual beings’ and Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) defines us with reference to a ‘selfish’ (eternal) gene. Unsurprisingly, the claim has also been made by John D. Niles that we should be called *homo narrans* – story-telling humans.<sup>1</sup> He argues that oral narrative is and has long been the chief basis of all cultures and that the ability to tell stories is what distinguishes humans from all other creatures. The latter ‘are intelligent, make tools or cultivate the earth and concoct plans to increase chances of a successful hunt, but only we humans tell stories.’<sup>2</sup>

So, what kinds of stories do we tell?

We define ourselves now by saying that we live in Postmodernity. One of the characteristics of that philosophical viewpoint is, following Friedrich Nietzsche, there is **not** ‘One Truth’ but many ‘truths’. So, likewise there is not One ‘Big’ Story (metanarrative) but many ‘little’ stories (*petit recits*). Moreover, religions have a wide variety of stories that contest in the religious market-place. There is an estimated thirty-nine thousand Christian denominations, each with its own competing story.<sup>3</sup> I will obviously **not** outline all those 39,000 stories. However, I will, attempt to classify (in the spirit of H. Richard Niebuhr [1894-1962 – *Christ and Culture* 1951) what I consider to be the seven major Christian categories (types) of stories that are being promoted today. The questions that arise will then be: Do you tell any of these stories? Which, if any, is closest to your religious story?

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<sup>1</sup> Niles, *Homo Narrans*.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Catt, ‘Scripture, Science and the Big Story’ in *The Once and Future Scriptures* ed. Jenks, 113.

<sup>3</sup> The figure of 39,000 (or sometimes 38,000) denominations is quoted in much Christian literature, though is usually not referenced. My source is the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary South Hamilton, MA, USA (see [www.gordonconwell.com](http://www.gordonconwell.com)). However, they list extensive data on only 9,000 Christian denominations.

The first of these is one that you will be familiar with:

**1. TELL ME THE OLD, OLD STORY**

*Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.  
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,  
For I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.*

***Tell me the old, old story, tell me the old, old story,  
Tell me the old, old story, of Jesus and His love.***

*Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in,  
That wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.  
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;  
The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.*

***Refrain***

*Tell me the story softly, with earnest tones and grave;  
Remember I'm the sinner whom Jesus came to save.  
Tell me the story always, if you would really be,  
In any time of trouble, a comforter to me.*

***Refrain***

*Tell me the same old story when you have cause to fear  
That this world's empty glory is costing me too dear.  
Yes, and when that world's glory is dawning on my soul,  
Tell me the old, old story: "Christ Jesus makes thee whole."*

***Refrain***

This well-known hymn by Katherine Hankey, the daughter of a banker in London, was originally a longer poem written in 1866 when she was recovering from a serious illness. It became popular when it was read a year later at an international convention of the *Young Men's Christian Associations*, in Montreal by Major-General Russell who was in charge of British troops quelling Irish Republicans (Fenians) rioting over British rule! In the audience was a composer – William H. Doane (1832-1915) – who afterwards in 1870 whilst on a stagecoach ride in the White Mountains wrote the music.

The 'old story' became popular because of a particular understanding of the Christian story, which became one of the corner stones of evangelical Christianity – the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. The 'wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin' was Jesus dying on a cross as a payment for our (or my) sin. He died in our place to satisfy the debt we owe to God. This 'story' is so central to evangelical Christianity that even Christianity Today, (allegedly) the most thoughtful evangelical magazine in the USA proclaims: "No Substitute for the Substitute" or most recently,

“Jesus fully satisfied God for me”!<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even in Australia my local Baptist Church last week announced on its notice board: “He paid the bill that he didn’t owe”.

The ‘old’ story has its origins in *The Fundamentals*, pamphlets distributed and funded by bothers, Milton and Lyman Stewart, who were ‘premillennial dispensationalists’ who following John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) thought the End Times was just around the corner.<sup>5</sup> These became codified in 1910 by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in five fundamentals of the faith, which are essential for all Christians:

- 1. The inerrancy of the scriptures themselves
- 2. The deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin Birth
- 3. The Blood (Substitutionary) Atonement
- 4. The Bodily Resurrection of Christ
- 5. The authenticity of Jesus’ miracles

together with the admonition that: “those who disagree with any of the above doctrines are not Christians at all. Rather, they are the true heretics.” However, these five fundamentals were found by some Christian groups not to quite encompass what ‘true believers’ should believe! So, they added other necessary ‘fundamental beliefs’ – the Trinity, total depravity of humankind, the imminent return of Christ, necessity of being born again, Creeds, the Assumption of Mary, and Transubstantiation etc. It is noteworthy that there arose for some fundamentalists (especially premillennial dispensationalists) a distinction between ‘true fundamentalism’ (based on Scripture) and ‘Orthodoxy’ (based on the historic Church and its Creeds)! As Malise Ruthven perceptively points out:

The ‘F-word’, however constructed, should never be taken at its face value: even at its origin, in *The Fundamentals*, its meaning was contested. In no tradition does one find a complete consensus, even amongst conservatives.<sup>6</sup>

We should also remind ourselves that this ‘old story’ isn’t that old!

## **2. TELL ME THE OLD, OLD STORY WITH A DIFFERENT STYLE (Emerging churches)**

The second category of story is a variation of the first category. It may be easily identified as ‘an old wine in new wineskins story.’ To put it succinctly: it is a change in style, not substance. This can be seen in the recent of rise of ‘Mega-Churches’ and what is termed ‘emerging churches’. There is an emphasis on ‘fresh-expressions’ in which the local church engages in worship that is viewed as contemporary and in tune with postmoderns. The churches view themselves as in a new phase of mission, trying to attract converts not as previously on “the mission- fields” abroad, but on their very doorstep. Books with intriguing titles such as *ChurchNext*, *The Post-Evangelical* and *The Missionary Congregation* have appeared together with the announcement of new creative liturgies and worship-services with unorthodox names like “Nine O’Clock” and “Warehouse.” Church communities have

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<sup>4</sup> *Christianity Today* (September, 2013) 37. I thank Marcus Borg for this reference.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent overview of this, see Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, 10-15.

<sup>6</sup> Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, 15.

been renamed with designations such as “Sublime,” “Cutting Edge,” “Revelation,” “Visions,” “ReIMAGINE,” “Graceland,” “ikon,” “Revolution” and “Resonance”; and slogans such as ‘METRO Church is a fresh, enjoyable, irreligious and ultra-relevant Christian Church’ or Generation Church’s ‘Declare, Display, Jesus’. The emerging church urges the faithful to find new ways of “being/doing church” and innovations such as “house church,” “café/messy church,” “Gen-X services,” “Taizé-style worship” have emerged. This has been complemented with “outreach” community projects that range from dance to popular music to befriending Goths, punks, and those in marginal sub-cultures. The buzzwords were “conversation,” “fresh expressions,” and “transforming secular space” to emphasize the decentralized and evolving nature of the church. The title of an emerging church-book, *They like Jesus but not the church* (2007), reflect the disillusionment felt by many for the institutional church and emphasize how they deconstruct traditional liturgical formulations to accommodate more contemporary styles of worship. At the heart of the emerging church is developing new worship-services that would be more suitable for people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While it must be acknowledged that the emerging church exhibits many variations, it is best characterized by a desire to tinker with ecclesiastical structures but not with theology. As one emerging minister succinctly puts it:

A group of people who are merely reading Jesus together as one among a range of possible sources of inspiration for a shared life (or a slice of it) [is] different from a group of people trying to follow him as the Lord of their journey.<sup>7</sup>

The new note that is sounded is that the structure of the church can change, new ways of “being the Church” can emerge, and novel Christian communities are being created.

### 3. THE OLD STORY IS BEING MODIFIED (EMERGENT AND RELIGIOUSLY PROGRESSIVE CHURCHES)

The **emergent and religiously progressive churches** church have no such qualm\about radical theological reformulation. I will highlight three major figures in this category.

First, there is Brian McLaren, who was the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community church in Maryland. McLaren rejects propositional theology based on creedal affirmations in favor of postmodern theology. This includes the postmodern notion of the “generous” encounter with the “Other,” which is both God and “the stranger.” This means, among other things, that evangelism becomes a conversation in which people explore together their respective faiths:

To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus (while learning it better myself), I would gladly become one of them (whoever they are) to whatever degree I can, to embrace them, to join them, to enter into their world without judgment but with saving love as mine has been entered by the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

McLaren appropriates postmodern literary theory to Biblical hermeneutics. This leads him to a

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<sup>7</sup> Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 122.

<sup>8</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 264.

generosity towards sexual minorities and an outspoken advocacy in matters of social justice. He rejects the political conservatism of much of American (evangelical) Christianity and notes that much interpretation of the Biblical texts reveals more about the reader than the text itself. Thus, he rejects literalist readings of Christian doctrines such as hell but uses it as a metaphor to “motivate us in the here and now and to realize our ultimate accountability to a god of mercy and justice and in that light to rethink everything and seek first the kingdom and justice of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, prominent member of the Evangelical Alliance Steve Chalke, antagonized them most in his description of the penal substitutionary theory of the Atonement as “**a form of cosmic Child Abuse**”. He argues that it portrays God as vengeful and unable to have a loving relationship with his son Jesus. “A theory rooted in violence and retributive notions of justice” and is incompatible “at least as currently taught and understood, with any authentically Christian understanding of the character of God.”

Third, Robin Meyers’ *Saving Jesus from the Church* (2009) has been championed by Christian liberals/progressives as an outline of the new Christian path. Assuming the mantle of John Shelby Spong, Meyers is a fresh voice and his book a rhetorical re-enfleshment of *A New Christianity for a New World*. He proposes an understanding of the faith that is not ordered ‘around the axis of sin and salvation’ but rather a ‘search for meaning in a world that is often meaningless’.<sup>10</sup> Jesus is more a teacher than a Savior, and instead of arguing about outdated Christian metaphysics and doctrines, Christians must follow his essential teachings. In short, Christianity is about ‘being, not belief’.<sup>11</sup>

For all three writers the emergent or progressive church is both deeply committed to, and deeply critical of Christianity. After all, Jesus did not come to found the church, but to transform the earth and its people. Marcus Borg expresses the new theological paradigm being used in emergent theology this way:

Being Christian is not about meeting requirements for a future belief in an afterlife, and not very much about believing. Rather the Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms life in the present. To be Christian does not mean believing in Christianity, but a relationship with God lived within the Christian tradition as a metaphor and sacrament of the sacred.<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising to learn that the emergent or progressive church has been attacked by the followers of the emerging church. It is highly significant that the major criticism has been *theological*. Especially problematic for the more conservative theologians of the emerging church, is the fact that McLaren replaces dogma with generosity and conversation. The most strident attack has come from the controversial Calvinist Mark Driscoll, pastor of a large emerging church in Seattle and also the “Acts 29 Network” that considers itself “emerging but not emergent.” In an oft-quoted passage Driscoll uses flowery language to describe their differences:

I eventually had to distance myself from the emergent stream of the network because friends like Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt began pushing a

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<sup>9</sup> McLaren, *The Last Word and a Word After That*, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Meyers, *Saving Jesus From the Church*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Meyers, *Saving Jesus From the Church*, chap. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 14.

**theological agenda** that greatly troubled me. Examples include referring to God as a chick, questioning God's sovereignty over and knowledge of the future, denial of the substitutionary atonement of the cross, a low view of Scripture, and denial of hell.<sup>13</sup>

For Driscoll (and many others) McLaren has strayed too far towards the "inclusive" end of the continuum and has watered down the real Gospel to accommodate secularism and postmodern philosophy. Ironically, Driscoll himself is frequently attacked by conservative evangelicals for his own attachment to such trappings of the prevailing culture as rock music and alcohol, as well as his mocking portrait of their "feminine" Jesus to whom they sing prom songs: "a wuss who took a beating and spent a lot of time putting product in his long hair."

The Emerging and progressive story is one that operates within the Christian framework seeking to reform Christianity.

#### 4. THE WORLD RELIGIONS' STORY

The fourth category is the world religions' story. Its origins lie in the 1970s educational methodology known as 'the phenomenology of religion' exemplified in writers such as Ninian Smart and its central theologian and campaigner – the late John Hick. Beginning in 1973 with his groundbreaking book, *God and the Universe of Faiths* Hick proposed was that there needed to be a religious Copernican revolution: one in which 'the universe of faith centers upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion.'<sup>14</sup> At the heart of every religion is the religious believer's experience of God/the Divine etc. It is that experience of something 'more/beyond' that is foundational to the belief systems. All the different religions are thus 'a' and not 'the' pathway to the sacred. Popular analogies of people walking different paths up the mountaintop to arrive at the same destination popularize this approach. God is thus greater than all 'gods' and religions merely point towards the existence of something greater than itself.

Modern exponents of this view include Val Webb (*Stepping Out with the Sacred*) and inter-faith ministers such as Stephanie Dowrick (*Seeking the Sacred*). This might be exemplified in the words of the Sufi poet, Rumi:

*The sun's light looks a little different  
on this wall than it does on that.  
But it is one light....  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*

#### 5. SPIRITUAL STORIES INCLUDING THE GREAT REVERSAL

The fifth category is spiritual stories including the great reversal and is reflected in the popular phrase: "I'm not religious but I am spiritual." This category can be sub-divided into a. those who are participants in a wide variety of 'spiritual' practices and b. those who view Christianity as undergoing a 'spiritual revolution' that will include a great reversal.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Driscoll, <http://www.TheResurgence.com>.

<sup>14</sup> Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 52.

Firstly, let us take a look at the wide variety of spiritual options that people are undertaking.

[At this point Nigel told the following story which he had set out on page 48 of his 2006 book *The God Problem*. “As a result of taking up the reins as Director of Wollaston College in Perth, Western Australia some years ago, I am among those whose eyes have been forcibly opened to what has been happening in the spirituality revolution. This institution, operated by the Anglican Diocese of Perth, was built in the 1950s as a residential theological college for the training of Anglican priests. Due to monetary constraints and a changed ministry model, full-time students are now non-residential and attend the college only one day a week for what is termed "priestly formation." Confronted with the problem of maintaining a thirty-bedroom facility, the Diocese invested heavily to expand the complex with new conference facilities. Overlooking the Indian Ocean and adjoining a national park, it has an ideal location; but who would be interested in what it had to offer? Given the relatively small population of Perth (1.2 million), I have been staggered by the number of spirituality groups that have used our facilities. Here is but a sample: Power Energetics, Shayagriva (Buddhism), Core Energetics, Healing Touch, Innerglow, Infinite Choice, Reiki, Therapeutic Massage, Pilates, Yoga (of many different sorts), Shivalabalayogi, Impersonal Enlightenment Foundation, Siddhayoga, Essential Oils, Sound Healing, Color Therapy, Homeopathy, Creative Dance, Dumiya Meditation, Creative Memories, Sacred Space: Sacred Mind, Conscious Living, Totally Alive, Healing Touch, Sacred Healing, Abdy, Bush Flower Essences, and Mindful Heart: Heartful Mind”.]

Secondly, there is a growing number of Christian writers who consider that Christianity is morphing into a ‘spiritual movement’ that is less fixated on belief and doctrines and more in tune with ‘the Age of the Spirit.’ Two leading champions of this view are Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (2009) and Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion* (2012). Bass argues that historically the Church has emphasized the following hierarchy of ‘order’: believing first, then behaving and finally belonging. She argues that today amongst those she calls ‘spiritual people’ a ‘great reversal’ has reordered those priorities to read: belonging, behaving and believing. After all, belonging is what people need most and recalls how Christianity originated:

It (Christianity) began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.<sup>15</sup>

This great reversal will lead to a new global Christianity that emphasizes community, social justice and spiritual experience. This is the faith of the future!

It might also be argued that Ken Wilbur’s *Integral Religion* (2006) and Paul R. Smith’s *Integral Christianity* (2011) are part of this spiritual story with their emphasis on the Spirit leading Christianity to move to ‘higher levels’ of mystical consciousness. The integral church embraces wisdom from across the world’s religious traditions, which lead to ‘higher levels’ of spiritual growth. Similarly,

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<sup>15</sup> Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 205.

Canadian Bruce Sanguin has pioneered a new evolutionary interpretation of Christian theology. In *The Advance of Love* (2012) he creatively combines the latest insights from cosmology, biology, cultural studies, developmental and integral theory with mystical wisdom. Sanguin argues that we are on a journey of infinite becoming in that each one of us is the presence of the evolving universe in human form, and as such must care for every part of it:

I imagine evolution as the miraculous, awe-inspiring emergence of a universe from the Heart and Mind of Reality (God). The combination of Heart (Love) and the Mind (Wisdom) is the milieu from which the world is endlessly and perpetually emerging – it did not just emerge 13.7 billion years ago, but rather it is emerging in every moment. Scientists call this cosmogenesis, the perpetual creativity of the Universe... Because everything is emerging out of Heart and Mind I am telling a sacred story. Heart and Mind is realizing itself through this incredible adventure of diversity that we call life. To understand the story in this manner is to awaken to an essential identity, a mystic unity with All that Is.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. THE ATHEIST STORY: HAS IT ANY STORY TO TELL?

It is often assumed that atheism has no story to tell, apart from its insistence that there is no God. However, that is to mask the wide-ranging agenda that today's atheists, who mirroring the way that gay and lesbians refused to be covered into submission, have 'come out of the closet' demanding to be heard. They are now firmly on the front foot ready to promote and advocate not only for the downfall of theism but for the end of religion:

Religions have become too assertive and too unreflective and must not be surprised to be treated accordingly. Atheists are no longer willing to allow their lives and societies to be hijacked by religious extremists. They are not only fighting back but asking others to declare their support: This is the challenge posed by the New Atheists... We are called out... and told to help exorcise this debilitating curse: the curse of faith. The New Atheists... condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil.<sup>17</sup>

As I have outlined in my book, *Religion Under Attack* (2011) the atheist challenge is to promote the scientific story over against any other story. This is because the scientific story is true: a story of the inexhaustible wonder of the physical world, and of ourselves and our origins. Carolyn Porco, the head of the imaging team for the Cassini space probe to Saturn, has argued that the grandeur of the cosmos is much more satisfying than anything that religion could offer. Images taken of earth from beyond Saturn by Cassini are far more awe-inspiring than ancient myths offered by religion. Moreover, even a "comforting" religious doctrine like life after death can be more accurately explained by the scientist:

To the promise of immortality, she counters with the proposition that all the

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<sup>16</sup> Sanguin, *The Advance of Love*, xv

<sup>17</sup> Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers', <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>.



atoms of our bodies will be blown into space in the disintegration of the solar system, to live on forever as mass or energy. That's what we should be teaching our children, not fairy tales about angels or seeing grandma in heaven. "If anyone has something to replace God," she says, "I think scientists do."<sup>18</sup>

It is this more aggressive attack on all religions and the assertion that science can provide answers to the mysteries of life which are far more cogent than those proffered by religions that has hit the headlines. The former accommodationism of scientists such as Isaac Newton that gradually over the centuries turned into separation and then eventually to the peaceful co-existence of "power sharing" (Stephen J. Gould's NOMA – non-overlapping *magisteria* of science-facts: religion-ethics) is now contested by a scientific monism that asserts that there are not two distinct areas of discourse, but *only* one. This is the scientific story and it is all encompassing. Indeed, according to Sam Harris' latest book science can now determine human values.<sup>19</sup>

## 7. THE SEA OF FAITH STORY: TWO STORIES – NON-REALIST AND SECULAR CHRISTIANITY

The Sea of Faith story is in fact two stories (a. non-realist and b. secular Christianity) that have been developed by its foundational theologians – Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering.

### 7A. NON-REALIST

Beginning with Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God* and Geering's, *Faith's New Age* both published in 1980 they set forth the "original story" of Sea of Faith. The vision is to free Christianity of its supernatural underpinning and replace it with a non-realist understanding of the Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> People must give up the realist idea of an all-powerful God "out-there" who sustains and creates the universe. Two phrases occur repeatedly in their books: "the world is outsideless" and "All this is all there is."

However, the word "God" need not be abandoned for it is still a helpful fiction that could be put to profitable use. When people use the word "God" they refer to a guiding spiritual ideal: the word does not name a metaphysical Being, but the concept could help people live *religiously*. Such a way of living could be described (to use the title of one of Richard Holloway's book) as a kind of "godless morality." Christian doctrines are not to be understood literally, but interpreted in terms of the way of life that they recommended. To believe in God as Creator, for example, is to understand one's existence as pure and gracious gift; and to live a risen life is to proclaim: "Christ is risen — in me!"<sup>21</sup>

So, began the idea of non-realism, best expressed in the words of Anthony Freeman: "I do believe in God, and one of the things I believe about God is that he does not exist."<sup>22</sup> You can retain the

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<sup>18</sup> As quoted in *Leaves, Religion*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape: how science can determine human values*.

<sup>20</sup> Geering anticipates this as early as 1965: 'Is the Christian faith inextricably bound up with the world- view of ancient mankind (sic), which has now been superseded... or can the substance of it be translated into the world-view of twentieth century mankind?' Lloyd Geering, *The Heresy Trial that Divided New Zealand*, location 53 Kindle eBook.

<sup>21</sup> *Leaves, Odyssey on the Sea of Faith* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman, *God in Us*, 28.

Christian language but you must strip away the objectivity of God, denude the Church of its supernatural teachings and there will emerge a non-supernatural form of Christianity that is more in tune with modern scientific thinking. Christian doctrines are regulative – they don't give us supernatural information but regulate or guide the way we live. This reformed Christianity can provide a framework for spirituality and ethics for humans who have (to use the radical catchphrase) "come of age." Cupitt describes it as Christian Buddhism: "the content, the spirituality and the values, are Christian; the form is Buddhist."<sup>23</sup> The Buddha insists that we should set aside the great questions of metaphysics and get on with walking along the Way. Revising *The Sea of Faith* for a reissue in 1994 he reiterated his central thesis, arguing that:

We might view a religious belief-system, not as a summary description of objective realities, but as a guiding vision and a programme for building a communal world.<sup>24</sup>

This is echoed by Geering in *The World to Come* (1999) endorsing Ludwig Feuerbach's famous lecture to students in Heidelberg:

We must replace the love of God by the love of man (sic) as the only true religion...My wish is to transform friends of God into friends of man (sic), believers into thinkers, candidates for the hereafter into students of this world.<sup>25</sup>

So the original story was non-realism and revision of the Church.

## **7B. STORY WITHOUT THE CHURCH: SECULAR CHRISTIANITY**

That original story began to evolve in the mid to late 1990s with the emergence of the idea of 'secular Christianity.' Significantly, both Geering and Cupitt began to sing from the same hymn sheet at about the same time (I'm not sure who was the originator of the idea!) with the modified story emerging in Cupitt's book *Reforming Christianity* (2001). He berates the Church for being "stuck up its own cul-de-sac" unable and unlikely to reform itself; and considers that it is consigning itself to the heritage industry, which will lovingly restore and preserve it, unchanging and dead. He sees the immense progress that has been achieved by those organisations and individuals who are outside the Church yet who have been influenced by Christianity, in particular "human emancipation, human rights, humanitarian ethics."<sup>26</sup> The Western secular world is the reformation of Christianity coming to pass — a desupernaturalized, secular, Kingdom religion. The crucial point to note is not that humanism has developed by itself out of a reaction to Christianity, but that secular humanism is "Christianity's own struggle to advance from its relatively warped ecclesiastical form to its final, 'kingdom,' stage of development."<sup>27</sup>

Geering argues the same case in *Christianity Without God* (2002):

The modern secular, humanist, post Christian world not only flowed out of traditional

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<sup>23</sup> Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Geering, *The World to Come*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity*, 128.

<sup>27</sup> Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity*, 136.

Christianity but manifests the continuing development of elements intrinsic to the Judeo-Christian tradition. For this reason, the modern secular and humanist world can legitimately be called ‘Christianity without God’.<sup>28</sup>

The demise of the Church is not the end of Christianity, for Christianity is still unfolding in secular humanism. What we are now witnessing is a change of dispensation, as the Church’s own inner logic brings it to an end and Christianity becomes its long-awaited, post-ecclesiastical, Kingdom form. By kingdom religion is meant ethical humanitarianism that helps others solely on the basis of our co-humanity “regardless of race, colour, creed, gender, sexual orientation, doctrinal soundness and moral desert.”<sup>29</sup> This is the **anti-realist**, nihilist, Kingdom vision of postmodern secularism and early Christianity. This “new” world of ours represents a much more highly developed version of the original Christian programme than anything available from the churches.

So, does that mean Western secular culture is the Kingdom of God on earth? Cupitt responds to this accusation in his latest offering, *The Last Testament*:

No... On the contrary, I insist that modern Western people are still largely struck in the ecclesiastical period and its mediated living. Instead of pouring ourselves out into the living of our own lives, we still waste too much of our time dreamily living vicarious lives with the help of dramas acted out on cinema and television screens. Instead of becoming gods and saints ourselves, we venerate celebrities, copy their fashions and parrot their opinions. We are still a long way short of entering upon our full inheritance – which leaves something for religion to do in the future. As always, religion should battle to persuade people that we and our world are still a lot less than we can and should be. Puritans and Evangelicals often darkly suspect that ordinary people are enjoying life too much: I’m dissatisfied for the opposite reason, I say we are not yet enjoying life nearly enough.<sup>30</sup>

Cupitt (and Geering) argue that ecclesiastical Christianity will be replaced by informal religious associations and networks such as Sea of Faith. Indeed, Cupitt lays down the gauntlet for Sea of Faith to be ‘the Church of the future.’ People should move on from Church Christianity, which is in terminal decline, to Kingdom religion, which is what secularism and globalization are *pointing* towards, though they still have a long way to go.

## (IN) CONCLUSION

These seven types or categories of story bring into sharp relief the various options that are available in the religious supermarket. The question that postmoderns will ask is: “Are the categories or types rigid and fixed?” In short, can I belong to one or more categories at the same time? In former times people used to have religious allegiance to only one type, but now people cross religious borders belonging to one or more types. You might be a hard-nosed atheist scientist who loves music and

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<sup>28</sup> Geering, *The World to Come*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Cupitt, *The Last Testament*, 124.

sings in a church choir whilst also practicing daily yoga. Our own stories are created from multiple sources, which are not necessarily consistent! It is difficult to ‘label’ people anymore – indeed we resist being categorized. Moreover, we are continually re-inventing ourselves – “Oh, I used to be so and so, but now I’m *sort of a...*” There are no fixed positions anymore.

So, the question I pose for you today is: “What is your religious story?” Does it correspond to any of these category types, or is it far more fluid? Are there multiple versions of reality, rather than just one?

Indeed, is multiplicity our ‘real’ story? And, do you create and re-create your own stories?

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**Nigel Leaves**  
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## Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Annual Conference 2013



**Nigel Leaves** is based in Brisbane, Australia. He is on the staff of St Francis Theological College and Canon of St John's Anglican Cathedral where he is responsible for adult theological education. He is Academic Associate of Charles Sturt University, teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Nigel is passionate about bridging the gap between what is taught in the Academy and preached in the churches. He is concerned that theology should be both honest and appropriate to the cultural situation in which it is situated. He is fearful that truthful "God-talk" has been sidelined from ordinary conversation and enjoins theologians to be more creative in their engagement with postmodernity. Nigel is highly regarded as a conference speaker and educator; and has lectured extensively in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA.