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Can Church rise from the ashes?

A former dean of theology gives mainstream religion 20 years unless it reinvents itself. **Gavin Simpson reports**

Still stirring the ecclesiastical pot at the age of 79, John Bodycomb says he was born to dissent. The Melbourne author, retired minister and former dean of theology's main interest when he started to attend church as a teenager, he cheerily confesses, was to check out the talent.

It was a worthwhile exercise, he says, as he ended up marrying one of the young women he found so attractive in the Congregational church he attended in Melbourne. Besides, there wasn't much else to do on a Sunday in those far-off days.

The other thing he found attractive about Congregationalism was its lack of emphasis on formal creeds and articles of belief. It appealed to his instinct to think, ask and doubt rather than simply accept age-old formulas of belief.

He found he was quite at home with a Church that held that "no set of words can finally set forth our experience in God and Jesus Christ".

Further, it was a Church that denied "the permanent and universal validity of any human formulation of the Christian faith".

He was ordained a Congregational minister at the age of 25, referred to as the "boy parson" in his first parish in Geelong.

He eventually became part of the Uniting Church which resulted from a merger between the Congregationalists, Presbyterians

and Methodists.

His long and winding journey of belief has taken him to parishes and university in Australia, New Zealand and the US and a stint as dean of the Uniting Church's Theological Hall in Melbourne.

Today he describes himself as a "closet Quaker", praying in silence, waiting to hear the "holy whispers of God" rather than bombarding the deity with requests.

In fact, he does not think anyone should ask God for anything, and that it is fatuous to take Jesus' words literally when he said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." That was just a bit of rabbinic hyperbole, he says.

His first wife died after a long battle with lymphoma, and he says it never crossed either of their minds to ask God to heal her.

Did she ever ask God "why me?" he wondered.

"'No,' she replied, 'I might as well say, why shouldn't it be me? Bad things happen.'"

As for miracles, well they just don't happen. Not even for Australia's very own saint, Mary MacKillop?

"What a lot of rubbish, a lot of tripe, what an embarrassment to my Catholic friends," he snorts. "Mary MacKillop was an exemplary woman, an exceedingly fine woman who was admired by Protestants as much as by Catholics, she didn't need any miracles."

It might take some sort of miracle, however, to get the Churches back to the glory days of his youth, whether Catholic or Protestant, if Dr Bodycomb is right in his bleak assessment of their chances in a world of increasing unbelief.

He gives the mainstream Churches 20 years at best to survive if they don't set about reinventing themselves.

Even in the US, he says, regarded as one of the most Christian nations in the Western world, 70 per cent of congregations are made up of 50 or fewer people.

As for Australia, he points to his own family, where of his 12 grandchildren, more than half of whom have been confirmed in the Catholic tradition, none goes to church apart from on special occasions.

But can his controversial new book, *No Fixed Address: Faith as Journey* (Spectrum Publications), help restore Christianity's fortunes? After all, it sets about demolishing cherished beliefs that have given Christianity — described by Dr Bodycomb as the most sublime religion — the power to attract millions over the centuries.

Will jettisoning ideas such as Jesus being part of a mystical union of three divine persons called the Trinity, when the going gets rough, help give an outworn form of Christianity a second chance?

According to Dr Bodycomb, discarding such tenets of belief is just acknowledging reality.

He wrote the book as an exercise in getting his own thinking clear, out of an exasperation with "God-talk people" (theologians and other religious professionals) who have let down "honest, average seekers" in this country.

"I'm just trying to give people permission to ask the big questions — what do we mean by God, what does Jesus mean for the 21st century — when the old images are no longer intellectually or spiritually satisfying."

For Dr Bodycomb, Jesus may not be divine, but he is much more than just another good man.

"For me, Jesus was a God-informed person 'par excellence', he stands out as a person



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who got an insight into ultimate reality which eludes most of the rest of us.”

He says for new ideas and a new form of Christianity to arise, the old has to die so the new can arise like a phoenix from the ashes.

It could be a painful process. As Christianity struggles to be reborn, he sees it heading for a major schism, bigger than that produced by the Protestant Reformation.

“There are a lot of disaffected, mainly older people who have faithfully hung in there, hoping something would happen, who are now saying ‘enough is enough’.”

But as change comes, it will be resisted, he thinks, by a counter-movement committed to a conservative orthodoxy. The result will be a Church split not along

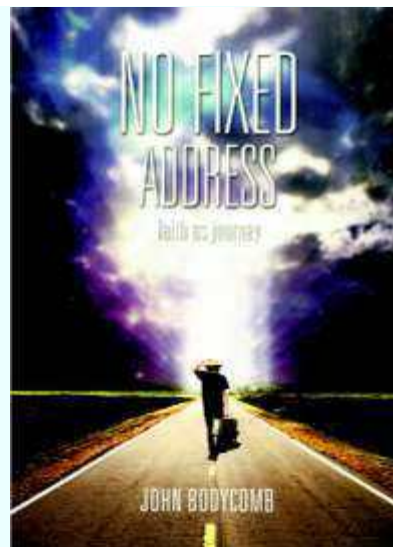
Protestant and Catholic lines, but between progressives and conservatives.

He cites the case of radical Catholic priest Father Peter Kennedy — who led his flock out of the archdiocese of Brisbane after being stripped of his post of parish priest over doctrinal and liturgical differences with the hierarchy — as an example of a crossing of old boundaries that will be part of the way the progressive Christian movement will develop.

It will have two major characteristics — mysticism and a commitment to justice in the world.

And it will be a sign that God, whoever he is, is much more versatile than our restrictive way of thinking about him has led us to believe.

Agent:



Controversial: John Bodycomb's book.