TESTING TRADITION & LIBERATING THEOLOGY;
Finding Your Own Voice
Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 July 2016
A Lecture By Dr Val Webb

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Why would I suggest, in my latest book, that our traditions need testing and our theology needs liberating in order to find our own voices?

Because I meet so many people who know only one version of Christianity and have no idea how theology has changed over the centuries and keeps changing, offering many options. Or I meet people who have left the church because what they hear does not make sense to their reason or experience, yet they still want a sacred connection, a spirituality in spite of religion, a reason for their place in the universe. There has never been only one way to talk about God and many doctrines claimed as eternal have simply been held in place by fear, power or authority, silencing more liberating ideas. In this book, I encourage people to ‘do their own theology’ - find what is transforming for them rather than simply accepting often dumbed-down scraps from the table of others. Philosopher Schopenhauer said, "A truth that is merely acquired from others only clings to us as a limb added to the body, or as a false tooth, or a wax nose. A truth we have acquired by our own mental exertions is like our natural limbs which really belong to us". ¹

This can be threatening to some religious authorities. Recently, when a local church congregation hosted a community-wide study on my new book, a minister from another denomination warned his congregation not to go because it was “progressive Christianity” which was not Christian. There are similar stories across the country in denominations where theological information is controlled in some way, leaving laity alienated and alone with their questions. In cities, people can find a hospitable church, but in country areas there are often no alternatives beyond leaving your denomination, which is heartbreaking if that is your history.

What we need in our churches and world today are literate lay people who know things have changed through the centuries and will not be bound to believe and repeat the old, old story described in medieval England, in ancient European monasteries or in imperial courts of fourth century Rome. A liberating faith should open our hearts to the changing landscapes in life, with tradition as a guide but not an iron-grill, allowing new knowledge, experiences, changing contexts and social upheavals to impact and shape our future.

If we permit our own experiences and circumstances to influence our life journey, however, one theological shape will not fit all - we do not all start at the same place nor arrive at the same conclusions. We only have to scratch the surface of religious biographies to see how differently people have responded to what they call God, which was the thesis of my book Stepping out with the Sacred: Human attempts to engage the Divine." As I was writing this talk, I read a beautifully illustrated article on the best way to meditate. But if this particular “best” method does not work for me and I would rather watch a sunset or listen to a stirring piece of music or not meditate at all, does this make me wrong, less spiritual, or do I know myself well
enough to realize what is transforming for me? Interestingly, when I expanded on this in a recent talk, someone wrote to me saying I was down-playing meditation which, for him, was the most important thing of all – which was exactly the point I was making – one size does not fit all, nor can we make ours the only correct way.

As a child, I was repeatedly told the best Christians experienced lots of miracles as proof of their faith - fortuitous parking spaces, unexpected envelopes of money arriving at the right time, frequent voice messages from God. I judged myself negatively according to these Christian markers, until I realized that my revelatory moments came through ordinary moments, words, ideas, art, nature, rather than miraculous proofs of divine favour. A liberating faith will depend on our personalities and circumstances – that which Paul Tillich called "of ultimate concern to us". We need to listen to the voices within our own experiences to do our theology, so the "good news" is "good news" for us, not somebody else. What is of ultimate concern to you?

What do I mean by doing our own theology? One clergyperson became nervous with this, thinking I was advocating we go off and create our own belief systems without clergy or community. But this is not what I mean. Of course we need authorities as resources for our thinking - theologians, philosophers, writers, scientists, nature, everyday experiences or common sense. What I do mean is we take responsibility ourselves to choose which authorities will be valid for us – whether reason, scripture, tradition, experience, or other life resources. Some people may use only one or two, maybe scripture and tradition, silencing their reason and experiences, but all resources are necessary and, as I trace in the book, different resources have had different authority at different times in Christian thought and are still recruited in differing degrees of importance.

So, what is theology? By the way, I use the word God as a general symbol for what people call the something more, the sacred, mystery, rather than any particular religious shape. Theology is firstly the process of talking about the where, what, how and if of God. This process always has two parts – and this is important. Firstly, the critical reflection on the story of God and secondly, how or whether that story has meaning in our present world. Two parts.

Holding these together means good theology will always be subject to changes as our world changes. When the early churches became more Greek than Jewish, they had to ‘do their theology’ to make a Jewish Jesus understandable within a Greek world-view. When the Enlightenment emphasised human reason over church authority or revelation, theology changed again. An all-powerful, all loving God had to be re-thought by Jews and Christians after the Holocaust. Survivor Elie Wiesel wrote: "Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke ... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God ...". When modern biology proved that women did not have less mind and spirit than men; and that every sperm was not a miniature male, such that a girl baby was a malfunction in the womb, theological claims for women’s inferiority based on this biology had to change.

Unfortunately, biblical interpretations of Eve’s sin and Adam’s rule and patriarchal ideas in some of the New Testament letters still took precedence over this changed biology, so that reinterpretting women’s place has not always happened. Much continues to be declared eternal truth despite the death of the philosophy or the science on which it was built. As we all know well, some people still argue that gay/lesbian associations are a chosen lifestyle condemned in the Bible, even though science has shown the biological basis of sexuality and society more readily accepts equal rights for every individual today. The Nicene Creed is
another example. It begins with 'I' or 'we' believe', which today means we believe these things to be true. Yet the creed’s cosmology features a three tiered universe - Jesus ‘came down’ from heaven, was buried and ‘descended into hell’, ‘rose again’ ... and ‘ascended into heaven’ - which flies in the face of contemporary science. Saying ‘I believe’ makes many people uncomfortable - they do not believe that cosmology.

Nothing is gained by demanding people sign allegiance to a certain doctrine simply because it is the tradition, if it does not make sense in the twenty-first century. We would not insist on a medical procedure from second century physician Galen, no matter how revered his ideas were - why should we do this with theological ideas based on second century knowledge? Theology continues to change and there has never been only one theological product. The same scriptures have justified a longing for death and a call to abundant living; an escape into monasteries and radical engagement in the world. According to the internet, there are some 41,000 Christian denominations – all stemming from the same scriptures; and the New Handbook of Christian Theology describes eighteen different types of theology and counting - process, systematic, womanist, political, liberation, to name a few.

Many church people simply show distain for anything labelled ‘theological’, seeing this as academics messing with the truth. ‘Go back to the Bible’, they say, believing the Bible, as they read it, contains everything that needs to be said about God. Some only read the King James Version, with no knowledge of its translators or the sources on which it relied. When a revision was announced in the 1880’s, using the earliest Greek and Hebrew manuscripts and the new methods of biblical research, some claimed it was changing the very words of God!

But such people are not ‘just reading the Bible’ as they claim. Interpreting everything at twenty-first century common sense face value is already ‘doing theology’ because we are bringing our contemporary biases, our interpretations and our reading methods to it. And reading the Bible literally or as an inerrant text is quite modern. Jewish rabbis and early church fathers did not do this - they looked for layers of meaning in the texts - narrative, poetry, allegory and spiritual stories. A literal reading was the least interesting.

Third century theologian Origen (185–284) said: no person ‘of intelligence’ would believe God literally planted a garden with a tree that differentiated good and evil - and then took evening strolls. All [scripture] has a spiritual meaning, but not all a bodily [literal] meaning; for the bodily meaning is often proved to be an impossibility.

The Bible did not drop from heaven in an English translation but is the product of much theologizing even before anything was committed to writing. Claims of an ‘inspired’ scripture as God’s actual words have imprisoned people for centuries in ancient desert rules that make no sense today. Geraldine Brooks’ Pulitzer Prize novel "The Secret Chord" is about the life of King David. It stays very close to the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel, but what struck me, was its descriptions of endless violence and cruelty, a culture of revenge, and its horrendous treatment of women, making me ask whether we can use any quotes from this Hebrew culture and battle psalms of victory, much of which would be illegal today.

In order to show how theological ideas have changed down the centuries, I’m going to do a ridiculously brief sweep through church history. I cannot summarize my whole book here - you hope I won’t - so I will shine a spotlight here and there on famous theological battles and evolutionary moments. You will have to read the book for details.

It was inevitable that Christianity would move towards some statement of belief in the early centuries. To do so from such diverse material as ancient writings, Jewish laws, remembered sayings of Jesus, interpretations by gospel writers and by Paul, and philosophical
ideas from Greco-Roman world views – which means that some other organising theme must be chosen, which means that other themes or conflicting ideas are left out or down-played. In beginning theology classes, I produce a pile of paper shapes in different colours and sizes and ask a student to sort them into ‘like’ groups. The first student usually ends up with six or eight piles, separating out different shades of a colour and different sizes of a shape. When I ask the next student to reduce the number of piles, different sizes of a shape and shades of a colour become one shape or one colour, removing many variations. To reduce the number of piles further, someone will make one pile, using the organising theme – they are all paper.

Students see that, in order to fit many different ideas, genres, contexts, cultures or events into one story or pile, we have to ignore the variations or leave a lot of things out. This happens when we try to construct one cohesive Christian story – what has been called a systematic theology.

In the first centuries after Jesus’ death, many letters and gospels were circulating. Paul’s letters were rushed responses to disagreements about behaviour or teaching. Romans was his only attempt to organize his ideas around a theme - the theme of “salvation to all who have faith, the Jew first and also the Greek” (Rom. 1: 16-17). The Gospel of Mark, on the other hand, written some ten years later, was organized around a different theme. His audience had endured Nero’s persecution, lived through a failed Jewish revolt and seen their temple destroyed. Mark’s Jesus, therefore, is the ‘suffering servant, faithful to his anointed task even to death’, a model for people enduring persecution. Romans and Mark, therefore, are organised around different themes, leaving out many things we pick up in other gospels or NT letters. Either writing on its own would lead to a different Christianity; and with only these two writings, Christianity would have been different, since most of what became orthodox comes from John’s Gospel.

By the end of the second century, the different teachers were claiming new revelations and forming separate groups. We have to remember that Christian communities were separated and scattered across the Mediterranean with little contact with each other and each other’s writings. Seeing the need for some unity, Bishop Irenaeus claimed an "orthodox" apostolic tradition based on John’s Gospel, and wrote Against Heresies - his attempt to make a systematic theology.

Early in the fourth century, the theologian Augustine produced his ‘systematic’ theology, City of God, organised around his chosen theme of salvation history, the idea that God’s plan for humanity was revealed through a sequence of actual historical events - creation, fall, flood, Exodus, Jesus. While all people lived through these same events, only those chosen or predestined for the City of God would gain salvation in Augustine’s theme - the rest would be damned. Salvation history became the organizing principle for much of theology until the Enlightenment, when questions began to be asked as to whether the biblical events listed in salvation history were actually historical events – or were they stories? If they are not historical events, salvation history does not work.

By the Middle Ages, Christian theology had access to the writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle and his Muslim interpreters and, as universities replaced cathedral schools, there was a developing interest in human reason over Divine revelation – which had been the authority of the past. Influenced by this, Dominican monk Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) produced his systematic theology, Summa Theologica, focusing on how reason and revelation could be held together in one rational argument, not as opposites or in conflict. God created humans to arrive at many truths through their own reason, Aquinas said, but where reason cannot reach, such as in supernatural events, Divine revelation clocks in. By calling reason and
revelation different God-given ways of knowing, human reason and confidence was raised to new heights.

But, as always, however, as the pendulum swings high in one direction, it swings back again. Martin Luther rejected this heady celebration of human reason and the power it gave to human authorities and found his organizing theme in Romans - justification by faith alone, not by works (which included human speculation and reason). His prime authority became ‘scripture alone’, not church authority and power. By selecting justification by faith, however, Luther left out other themes - he called the letter of James a book of straw because it said "faith without works is dead". His successor in reform, John Calvin, wrote his systematic theology, the Institutes of the Christian Religion – two volumes at the age twenty-seven. What were you writing at twenty-seven? Or your children? Taking a dominant theme of his time, Calvin emphasised order in the universe. Divine order meant that absolutely everything was under God’s direct control and providence, as Augustine’s salvation history had said, but Calvin emphasised more than Augustine or Luther that only the predestined were saved, the others irretrievably damned.

In response to these reformers, the Council of Trent reaffirmed Catholic theology and church authority in the mid 1500’s, causing a split between Catholics and Protestants that led to thirty years of war. By this time, the Eastern Orthodox church had split from the West over theological and historical issues, so Christian theology was certainly never homogenous - and I have not mentioned the Baptists, Quakers or Mennonites. One size does not fit all, despite efforts to claim it does. Other challenges were at work. Copernicus (1493-1543) was a contemporary of Luther, and Galileo (1564-1642) was born the year Calvin died. Their scientific discoveries seriously undermined existing theology, as would the emerging Enlightenment. The pendulum swings on.

With science now showing the universe operating within natural laws verifiable by experiment, miraculous interventions as evidence of God’s providence could now be explained by natural laws and observable patterns. God was still Creator, but left the universe to the God-given laws and did not interfere. Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) called supernatural claims things that we simply cannot know, and developed his system on what we can know - our reason. Kant did believe that there was a ‘moral obligation’ somewhere as a human - to do one’s duty and live a good life, but this was a far cry from the reformers’ claim of God in actual control.

There was another swing in the Enlightenment - to religious experience and holy living – what was called pietism. John Wesley (1703-91) was influenced by this and also by the theologian Arminius (1560-1609) who, unlike Calvin, did not believe a gracious God would arbitrarily condemn some to hell without reprieve. Wesley spoke of ‘prevenient’ grace offered to everyone, requiring a personal decision, rather than Calvin’s irresistible grace only for the predestined – which could not be refused. Wesley added experience as an authority for theology along with tradition, scripture and reason.

His colleague Frederick Schleiermacher also claimed experience as his authority in his systematic theology, The Christian Faith. He went, not with Aquinas’ reason or Kant’s moral conscience or the Reformers’ scripture alone, or Catholic Church authority, but that ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ on God, lived out, as he saw it, in the man Jesus. Doctrines were second-hand to experience and theology’s job was to express this feeling in words, Schleiermacher said.

By the late 1800’s, Germany led Europe in scholarship. The Philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) had said that all ideas – on anything - moved progressively forward, and that religious ideas had peaked in German Christianity, ‘the absolute religion’ in which ‘the unity of the divine
This superiority would eventually propel Germany into two world wars. In order to demonstrate this progression of thought within Christianity, Hegel went back to its beginnings and began to question whether biblical events were actual historical events or simply stories told to illustrate universal concepts - for example, the ‘fall’ was not an historical event but it described the universal experience of human alienation and separation.

David Strauss (1808-1874) took up Hegel’s idea and began investigating the historical reality of Jesus, ushering in the quest for the historical Jesus. Biblical criticism was now in full swing, where people ask questions of the Bible from outside the Bible, as was done with other literature. Scholars discovered, for instance, that second century Bishop Irenaeus had added the names of disciples to the gospels as their authors, incorrectly giving the Gospels the authority of eye-witness accounts that could not be questioned. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), theologian and medical missionary, bemoaned the fact that such biblical criticism had not been allowed up till this time. "In what a condition we find ourselves today," Schweitzer said, "... because in the earliest Christian period writings were allowed to appear, bearing quite falsely the names of apostles, in order to give greater authority to the ideas put forth in them!"

Across the channel, Charles Darwin had upset theology with his book "On the Origin of Species". Some theologians simply declared Darwin’s ideas incompatible with scripture, while others saw them as compatible - ‘God’s way of doing things’. For others, it simply re-enforced the belief that God was a projection of the human mind.

Then came two World Wars. Schweitzer wrote of early 20th century Germany: It seemed to be assumed everywhere not only that we had made progress in inventions and knowledge, but also that in the intellectual and ethical spheres we lived and moved at a height which we had never before reached, and from which we should never decline ... and now war was raging as a result of the downfall of civilisation.

Some German theologians sided with the German war machine in the wars while others faced devastated congregations. How can you preach the superiority of German thought when it has led to this? Theology is never only theory - it must answer real problems of existence.

Different theologians faced the challenge in different ways. Karl Barth (1886-1968) was disillusioned when his theology professors supported Germany’s war plans in the first war (Manifesto of the Ninety-Three); and he found that liberal theology’s confidence in human reason, on which he was raised, was not reassuring to a congregation in war. So, sloughing off philosophy, natural theology, reason, science and anthropology - all those things that had been influencing theology - Barth declared, like the reformers before him, that we can only know about God through Divine revelation, not human reason - the Word of God revealed in Christ, read in the scriptures and preached in church. Theology was about responding to what God says - all else is human idolatry.

But after such openness to reason, experience, culture and science, can we really do theology only through God’s self-revelation in the Bible, argued from the Bible – and ignore experience and culture and science? What about context and experience? Would Barth himself have rejected liberal theology without his wartime experience and context; and how much did Barth’s own reasoning influence his interpretation of biblical revelation?

For Rudolf Bultmann, the problem was the language and thought forms of the New Testament, with its devils and angels distracting to the modern mind. The gospel, he said has to be ‘demythologised’ - have mythological elements removed so the message could be "heard" in a contemporary context. For Bultmann, the message was simply that God acted in Jesus,
calling people to respond and obey his radical vision, just as Jesus’ followers had responded and were transformed. We do not need the mythological stories in which this message was cast.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer left pacifism to help plot Hitler’s assassination. He was arrested and executed at age 39, two weeks before Allied forces liberated his prison. Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison, collected after his death, argued that Christians could no longer retreat into church buildings, religious language and empty rituals, as his Lutheran church had done in the war – that was a cheap grace. Since science, ethics and politics had now learned to answer their questions without religion’s God, to make humans more dependent on this God simply returned them to adolescence. x A ‘coming of age’ church, Bonhoeffer said, needed a religionless Christianity free from dependence on an outdated image of God. Christians must jump into the world and act, a costly grace. Bonhoeffer was not promoting atheism (as some people thought) but he was describing the suffering God that he saw, not in churches and religion during the war, but in Christians serving others in costly discipleship, as Jesus, the man for others, had done, even to death. Bonhoeffer rejected Barth’s focus on the God that could only be known in revelation in scripture and church, such that everything, Bonhoeffer said, simply had to be swallowed whole or not at all. xi

When Paul Tillich was dismissed from the University of Frankfurt for opposing the Nazis, he moved to America. After Barth’s resounding ‘no’ to philosophy and human reason, Tillich returned a strong ‘yes’. The pendulum swings again. Philosophy was essential, he said, to theology because it asked the questions about human existence that theology must ask. Tillich started his thinking from the human search for authentic existence in an age of anxiety – what we all remember was called Existentialism. ”The religious man,” Tillich said in the gendered language of the time, feels deserted by man, by God and by himself. ”The traditions and symbols of his community have become meaningless to him ... He experiences the loneliness of having to die and of personal guilt”. xii Humans must therefore have the courage to take the leap of faith, to risk the uncertainty as Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard had described. ”Faith says ‘Yes’ in spite of the anxiety of ‘No’, ”Faith does not remove the ‘no’ of doubt and the anxiety of doubt ... faith is [simply] ... the state of being grasped by ultimate concern”, Tillich’s term for God. xiii This God is not a Being, a thing amongst other things, but the Ground of Being, Being itself, beyond any essence and existence. Like Bonhoeffer, Tillich was accused of atheism, but he simply moved beyond a personalised Being ”out there” to the Ground of everything outside all categories, and not revealed only through Christ, scripture and church, as Barth had said.

I hope you see the ongoing theological pendulum swings. To claim that only one is correct is simply a choice. What makes sense to you? Don’t be dismayed if nothing does yet - we have more places to go.

In 1963, the small book Honest to God by Bishop John T Robinson was published in England and within weeks, translators were working on four foreign editions. Robinson was also concerned about what was believable for his day. We have moved, he said, from God ‘up there’ to God ‘out there’, but space travel has eliminated that possibility and this God is dead. Robinson adopted instead Tillich’s Ground of Being or Ultimate Concern, which Robinson then called love - ”To assert that ‘God is love’ is to believe that in love one comes into touch with the most fundamental reality in the universe, that Being itself ultimately has this character’ - love. xiv Robinson was not saying anything new but he wrote for the public as a bishop about discussions previously confined in theological halls.
A major evolution in theological method happened in the sixties. Rather than building one theological system to fit all circumstances – the systematic theologies I have been describing - contextual theology emerges. All theology is contextual, in that theologians write out of their own personal situation and experience. Augustine claimed original sin because he could not control his sexual desires – but that’s another lecture. Rabbi Kushner wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* when his son died of a premature ageing disease. I wrote about doubt because that was my struggle. Contextual theology, however, is more than just acknowledging the influence of your context on your theological ideas – contextual theology actually starts with the context. What's happened? What's the issue? It gives priority to the context before it actually starts theologising. It first analyses what is going on in the real world, especially experiences of oppression, then critiques traditional theology in light of this as to whether or not the current theology answers the problems. It then goes back to scripture to see what might actually be liberating in this situation, rather than simply imposing the traditional theological arguments – a systematic theology – onto the situation.

I give many examples of contextual theology in my book, but let me talk about one - Liberation theology. In the 1960's, small communities in urban slums and rural areas of Latin America were oppressed and ignored by the powerful Catholic church, which was aligned with the governments. With the help of some priests, these communities went back to the scriptures and found that instead of putting up with poverty and oppression for a heavenly reward, the Bible told stories of the oppressed being liberated in this life and God's preference for the poor. The liberation theology that emerged embraced biblical passages that promised release from oppression; it named 'sin' as the tendency to work against God's reign; and 'church' as those who work to bring in this reign, not the institution. They had discovered a biblical theology that was good news for them, and acted on it, even when it was against the institutional church.

This methodology spread. Afro-American, African and Asian liberation theologies emerged from different contexts of oppression. Feminist liberation theology questioned women’s subordinate roles, their exclusion from ordination, a sexist church, male language for God, and Biblical verses used to support violence against women. They found other biblical texts that were liberating for women but had been ignored by male theologians, and they demoted a lot of the patriarchal texts used against them. In time, womanist theology emerged when Afro-American women realized that their struggles in black families were different from white women academics. In each case, people reread the Bible from their context, rather than accepting a top-down theology to fit all.

Contextual theology gives all of us the power to find a theology that fits our experience - it is no longer the job of the theologian and clergy alone, working from their particular experiences. When author Anne Rowthorn considered her situation as an Anglican lay woman, she wrote: "The laity of the Church are a voiceless, sightless, powerless, invisible mass .... essentially persons without a history, in which to be rooted". xv

Church histories are not written about laity, even though they are the overwhelming majority - laity have historically been the shadow behind the institution and its leaders in a two caste society. This was not always so.

We have another example - of Paul's egalitarian churches recognizing the spiritual gifts of all members but, in time, Christianity became organized around an order of bishops and priests in the Roman empire. As clergy power was elevated, lay power and participation waned. The reformers rejected a change in “character” bestowed by ordination, but they kept a clergy-centred church with ordination clearly a special 'call' above and beyond the
priesthood of all believers. Many churches are in a different place today with laity leading worship and administering sacraments, not because of a theological epiphany about laity, but because there are not enough clergy, and small churches cannot afford a full time person. It is not so long ago that I sat in Uniting Church Assemblies, hearing fiery arguments against lay presidency as unsound theology. As old reasons for a two caste system become fuzzy and boundaries are crossed of necessity in a different context, lay people need to claim their power in this new context, challenging arguments that keep them as second-class citizens.

Progressive Christianity is a contextual theology. Many people who have felt oppressed and silenced by the refusal of their churches to allow questions or challenges to "correct" belief, have gathered in small groups, within and outside churches, offering safe places for 'doing our own theology' without censure. They desire biblical and theological literacy and take advantage of scholarship that addresses their questions. As with other contextual theologies, one size does not all and various streams have emerged in progressive Christianity to address the specific contexts in which people find themselves and the different questions with which they struggle.

Some people are doing theology with their feet, walking out of churches. This 'spiritual not religious' group is driven more by disenchantment with institutional religion than a particular definition of 'spiritual'. (Ask someone what they mean by spiritual, not religious!) People do not want to be identified with the scandals, the impotence and certainties of many religious institutions and find Sunday worship, whether it's jazzed up or dressed down, foreign to contemporary life, yet don't want to relinquish a spiritual connection. The 'spiritual not religious' generation does not feel guilty about not teaching all the Bible stories to their children. They read from many texts that help them live responsibly on the planet. They tell their children about the universe, forests and seasons, and anchor them in a wonder which leads them to deeper reflection.

We live on an amazing planet, but we had a beautiful planet may be what we tell our children and our grandchildren. In the past, not much was said about a theology of the planet. Even traditional theological motifs like creation, fall and redemption were about humans, not about creation. Indigenous traditions that revered Mother Earth were called 'pagan' under Victorian England's criteria that a proper religion had to have a High God. Theological resistance to seeing the Divine in nature, rather than only in Jesus, further demoted the planet from the Reformation onwards. Only through eco-theologians like Tielhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Thomas Berry (1914-2009), Sallie McFague and our own Norman Habel, has creation become a subject in need of a liberating contextual theology. Our present concern for the planet has not arisen from academic discussions, but from the 'groaning' of the earth itself, the cries of disappearing animals and the cracking of dry mud flats. It is so distressing when climate change is dismissed by some Christians because God would not let the planet get into a mess unless it was God's plan. Thomas Berry said, 'The renewal of religion in the future will depend on our appreciation of the natural world as the locus for the meeting of the divine and the human. The universe itself is the primary divine revelation'.

So far, we have been talking about theology in Christian history, but if God is the Ground of Being or the Spirit in everything, God is also in the Hindu, Muslim and the Sikh. Can we talk of Jesus as the only incarnation if we have never checked incarnations in other religions? Religion scholar Diana Eck says, "Uniqueness, to me, does not mean that the 'Jesus story' is the only story of God's dealings with humanity, nor the only true and complete story. The language of only is the language of faith, not of statistics. " To talk authentically about a universal something we call God, we need to know how it appears in different venues, not just through interfaith chats, but by 'crossing over' - experiencing other religions ourselves to bring fresh
insights to our own. If you want to pursue that line, I recommend Paul Knitter’s book *Without Buddha, I could not be a Christian.*

By urging people to do their own theology, I do not mean read every book that’s impossible. We need theologians and clergy to unpack this material in ways lay people can understand. But problematic areas of belief are not things that only theologians see - in fact, laity sometimes see more clearly because they are not blinkered by academic givens and because they have lived their faith in different circumstances. We need lay people to do their theology. How can we be a force in the world with nothing to offer than dogmatic sound bites from somebody else’s experience? And laity do not need fairy floss that tastes sweet but dissolves into nothing in seconds. While clergy might rightly think that Hegel is too obtuse for those not trained in philosophy, laity can understand the issues at stake if put in common language, the theologian’s job.

The work of theology is never done because the world keeps changing and theology reflects (as I said at the beginning) both the Christian story and the relevance of that story in the world today. Doing theology is about spring-cleaning our minds rather than hoarding past-their-use-by-date ideas. Our faith may be two thousand years old but our thinking need not be. Theologian C. S. Song said: "Theology done with imagination and passion in the midst of a human community, inspired by a vision of a better tomorrow, will have to be done over and over. It has to start again - a new journey, a new adventure, a new pilgrimage; in short, a new beginning."

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4 [http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm](http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm). These include different varieties of a denomination e.g. Lutheran Church in Germany and Lutheran Church in Australia. Two thirds are independent churches in Africa in different locations.
17 Thomas Berry, quoted in Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: our global quest for a spiritual life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008), 172