

# New Faith Paradigms

What's the Future of Christian Community?

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“To serve the present age: *Ekklesia* for  
the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

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## What's the Future of Christian Community?

### Setting the Scene

**Current research demonstrates that church attendance, overall, continues to decline in Australia despite limited growth occurring within some churches<sup>1</sup>. Despite much effort to promote the Christian faith through evangelism, missional efforts and new programs and activities, the church's message and impact continues to languish. For some denominations, the decline is so serious that many are now calling for a radical shift in our understanding of Christian spirituality, theology, and community if there is going to be any chance of engaging with the next generation<sup>2</sup>. However, despite such alarming trends, interest in spirituality continues to flourish in our culture, as people seek new paradigms of faith. This includes a sharp rise in those who identify as 'Spiritual but Not Religious' (SBNR)<sup>3</sup>. But is the church listening?**

In today's complex and rapidly changing world, it has become increasingly clear that the church is being called to reckon with 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. For many, living in a technology driven global society has not only brought people into contact with those of other cultures, faiths, and outlooks, but has also called into question many of our traditional beliefs about God including the validity of our religious institutions. Furthermore, our access to unlimited information via the internet, podcasts, YouTube, AI and other electronic media is accelerating people's exposure to new ideas in science, philosophy, theology, spirituality, culture, and higher education which are all having a major impact on the way we now understand faith resulting in an increased tendency to question traditional frameworks of Christianity<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacka & Powel, *Changes in Church Attendance in Australia (NLCS) Research*, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> French, King & McLaren, *Tomorrow's Faith Podcast*, 2022, Episodes 3, 5 & 7.

<sup>3</sup> McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia – A National Study on Religion, Spirituality and Worldview Trends*, 2017, pp. 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> McLaren, *Faith after Doubt – Why your beliefs have stopped working and what to do about it*, 2021, pp.297-299.

## Christian Faith in a Changing World

To understand the church's predicament further, it is important to realise that in the west, we now live in a largely post-Christian society with only around 15% of the Australian population attending church, with as little as 7% of the population actively participating in their church on a regular basis, in contrast to 14% of the Australian population that now identify as Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) with an additional 22% of the population having no religious affiliation (NONES)<sup>5</sup>. What is so interesting about these results, is that this lack of affiliation with Christianity is predicated not upon a rejection of spirituality per se, but often upon the way in which traditional faith is presented in terms of its institutional structures, dogma, and due to a perception of having outdated beliefs. Furthermore, in cases where Christianity has been presented poorly resulting in anti-intellectualism, bigotry, religious abuse, and trauma through harmful or outdated theology, it is not surprising that people are searching for spirituality elsewhere if the church refuses to understand people's changing values, sensibilities and desire for new approaches to faith.

While some Christian faith communities have sought to update their church buildings, worship style and programs for a contemporary audience, such attempts often fail to address the underlying theological frameworks that underpin the values, beliefs and practices adopted by the faith community itself. For example, if an evangelical church simply updates its external appearance to embrace an organic, missional, or online church format without questioning its basic assumptions including the paradigm that informs its values, it will not be long before such approaches are largely dismissed, even if the external appearance or format of the church has changed. In fact, when McCrindle conducted its 2020 research on the future of the church in Australia<sup>6</sup>, its findings highlighted that:

- Australians are disillusioned with the church but spiritually hungry.
- The spiritual landscape in Australia is changing.
- The church requires a new generation of leaders adaptable to change.

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<sup>5</sup> McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia – A National Study on Religion, Spirituality and Worldview Trends*, 2017, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> McCrindle, *The Future of the Church in Australia*, 2020, pp. 8-47.

- There is a growing diversity of culture and religion.
- There is a declining affiliation with Christianity.
- The church needs to explore new models of community.

To understand how the church is being called to change in today's world, it is important to understand how our society has transitioned from a premodern worldview to embrace a modern rational or postmodern pluralistic set of beliefs with the leading edge of culture now moving into a more holistic metamodern or integral worldview<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, if the church only offers a one size fits all approach to faith in a traditional or evangelical framework, people who have outgrown older stages of faith and spirituality are likely to become dissatisfied with their church resulting in cognitive dissonance, disagreements, and a desire to seek out new frameworks of faith that can accommodate their changing beliefs. This is perhaps why we are witnessing both an explosion of interest in the phenomenon of 'faith deconstruction' inside the church<sup>8</sup> and rising numbers of people identifying as 'Spiritual but not Religious' outside the church<sup>9</sup>. What unites both groups are that they both represent a rejection of traditional forms of faith including a growing desire for new spiritual and theological conversations outside of institutional religious structures. This is to allow new approaches to faith and spirituality that are congruent with the culture, values and consciousness of people in today's world.

## Changing Faith Requirements in the 21st Century

To understand how our spiritual landscape is changing, this paper will now summarise four main worldview stages that either exist within Christian communities or are in the process of emerging. These stages represent a synthesis of the findings taken from Prof. James Fowler's research on stages of faith<sup>10</sup> and the Spiral Dynamics model proposed by Prof. Clare Graves, Don Beck and Christopher Cohen from the National Values Centre that articulate different worldview paradigms or epistemes governing the values held by different individuals and communities in western society<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> McIntosh, *Integral Consciousness*, 2007, pp. 42-96.

<sup>8</sup> Tongeren – University of California, *Why People Quit Religion*, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Research Institution, *Who are the Spiritual but Not Religious?*, 2019, pp. 1-19.

<sup>10</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 1981, pp. 135-211.

<sup>11</sup> Beck & Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics*, 2006, pp. 229-292.

These stages are summarised as 1) Traditional Christianity 2) Modern Christianity 3) Postmodern Christianity; and 4) Integrative Spirituality. So, let's look at these in turn:

### Stage 1 – Traditional Christianity

Traditional Christianity tends to be institutional, hierarchical, and sometimes patriarchal with a strong emphasis on belonging to a certain group or denomination. This includes conformity to authority and established doctrines, orthodoxies, and moral standards. Mythic-literal interpretations of scripture are common at this stage with the bible viewed as being inerrant and infallible. For many traditional churches, sacraments and rituals are strictly codified and church beliefs tend to be dogmatic in nature. This form of Christianity is common in conservative and traditional churches.

### Stage 2 – Modern Christianity

Modern Christianity is contemporary in its style and worship and values rationality to defend and promote the Christian faith. This includes a strong emphasis on bible study, seminary / bible college education, evangelism, overseas mission, and personal salvation. For many modern churches, a great emphasis is placed on performance, church growth, financial success and the delivery of its programs and goals. This form of Christianity and faith is common in modern evangelical and Pentecostal churches, mainline churches, and Christian apologetics ministries.

### Stage 3 – Postmodern Christianity

Postmodern Christianity is egalitarian in its orientation and focuses on diversity, inclusivity, and communal well-being including an orientation towards deconstructive critical thinking. This includes a strong emphasis on human rights, social justice, environmental stewardship, and community engagement as well as interests in liberation theology, LGBTQIA+ rights, ecumenical efforts, and interfaith dialogue. This form of Christianity is common among progressive Christians and those undergoing faith de(re)construction and welcomes freedom of thought that challenges the status quo. In this framework, faith communities tend to be decentralised in nature e.g. workshops, events and retreats including emergent / organic community spaces.

## Stage 4 – Integrative Spirituality

Integrative Spirituality adopts a holistic approach to spirituality. This involves a recognition of the interconnectedness of faith, science, and diverse spiritual perspectives. This includes a willingness to engage with the evolving complexity of the world by adopting a multi-perspectival approach that can embrace paradox and non-dual or dialectical insights<sup>12 13</sup>. For many at this stage, the sacred is understood beyond the limits of culture and religion thus giving rise to a universalising notion of spirituality, divinity and ultimacy. For some, this may include a post-religious or post-metaphysical idea of faith that is deeply mystical in its orientation focussed on spiritual practices, new spiritual insights, consciousness transformation and going beyond the limits of propositional beliefs. This includes an embrace of leading-edge ideas in science, philosophy, theology, and spirituality by exploring new conversations in visionary future-oriented communities.

## Important Reflections

After considering the above stages, it is not hard to see why many Christians are now undergoing faith deconstruction inside the church, and why many have left the church to become Spiritual but not Religious.

When we consider the prevailing culture wars and theological battles that prevail in contemporary Christianity<sup>14</sup>, it is not difficult to see where the current fault lines occur. If traditional Christianity including evangelical, pentecostal and mainline churches fail to acknowledge that people are seeking new spiritual and theological paradigms and frameworks of faith, they may continue to alienate growing numbers of people both inside and outside the church<sup>15</sup>. Simply trying to promote old time religion, even in a modern garb, is almost certainly going to be rejected by those who identify as Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR) as well as those undergoing faith deconstruction. Today's culture is highly educated, well informed, technologically literate, and deeply sceptical towards outdated theological frameworks and presentations of the Christian

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<sup>12</sup> Rohr, *The Naked Now – Learning to See as the Mystics See*, 2009, pp. 143-155.

<sup>13</sup> McIntosh, *Integral Consciousness*, 2007, pp. 294-307.

<sup>14</sup> Wilber, *The Religion of Tomorrow*, 2017, pp. 68-70.

<sup>15</sup> Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 2012, pp. 39-99.

faith. Without offering viable faith pathways that genuinely addresses the cognitive dissonance that multitudes of people are experiencing, there is unlikely to be any revival, no matter how much the church tries to ignore the elephant in the room<sup>16</sup>!

To understand the historical trajectory of our culture, it is important to remind ourselves of the epistemological forces that have influenced our theories of knowledge and standards of truth. Put simply, we cannot assume that traditional presentations of God shaped by a premodern worldview will continue to be accepted as factual within the modern west that is now deeply embedded in the scientific method, historical critical scholarship, and critical thinking. Also, we cannot assume that modern forms of Christianity that emphasize progress, rationality, and grand narratives will be taken seriously by postmodern approaches that have deconstructed those narratives, emphasizing fragmentation, scepticism, and relativism.

As I'm sure you'll appreciate, sharing the gospel is often not simple or straightforward. This is why the stakes are so high if the church fails to address the genuine intellectual and spiritual objections that people have. So, is there a way beyond the impasse?

## The Birth of Metamodern Christianity

For many Christians who feel like they have been fighting against a tide of modern secularism, scientism and new atheism or feel adrift in a postmodern cultural milieu of pluralism, individualism, and relativism, they might be surprised to know that the leading edge of culture today is not postmodernism, but rather the post-postmodern movement known as metamodernism that shares much in common with an integral worldview. This movement has recently attracted much attention in academia in the arts, humanities, and sciences and is now making its way into the fields of theology and the philosophy of religion. Unlike premodern understandings of God that seem mythological in nature, or modern understandings of God presented as a set of rational propositions, or even postmodern understandings of God understood within a subjective, contextual, relativistic, and pluralistic framework, metamodernism allows meaning, purpose, connection and hope to return whilst moving beyond the problems

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<sup>16</sup> Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 2003, pp. 127-171.

and limits of mythological, propositional, and subjective belief systems. Interestingly, this opportunity was picked up by Benjamin Vincent writing on behalf of Christianity Today who claimed that metamodernism allows Christianity to “move beyond both its fruitless shadow boxing” with its new atheist opponents and its “outmoded and faulty apologetic arguments against postmodernism”<sup>17</sup>.

As the leading edge of culture, metamodernism is the cultural logic of cultural logics<sup>18</sup> which aims at a big picture perspective that seeks to integrate these seemingly contradictory approaches by blending the earnestness and hope of modernism with the scepticism and irony of postmodernism. Within this framework, metamodern Christianity emerges as a form of faith that reflects these dynamics, characterized by a simultaneous embrace of both faith and doubt, of tradition and progress, and of certainty and questioning.

Metamodern Christianity therefore presents the church with the much-needed opportunity to both transcend and include Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern Christian perspectives in a manner that is compatible with Integrative Spirituality discussed previously<sup>19</sup>. In this way, Metamodern Christianity can provide a spiritual home for both Christians undergoing deconstruction as well as the Spiritual but not Religious community that was previously unable to connect with the church. Such communities would be explorational, experimental and dialogical providing spaces to engage in new spiritual and theological conversations outside of institutional religious structures. In this way, Metamodern Christianity is an evolving community that encourages people to understand God in new, novel, and diverse ways whether that be reading scripture through a different hermeneutic lens, developing new theological concepts, using fresh language and terminology for describing God, experimenting with alternative approaches to community and engaging in new spiritual practices.

So, what are the main features of Metamodern Christianity? Below is a summary of its main characteristics:

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<sup>17</sup> Vincent – Christianity Today, *Goodbye Postmodernism, Hello Metamodernism*, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Dempsey, *Metamodernism – The Cultural Logic of Cultural Logics*, 2023, pp. 1-22.

<sup>19</sup> Dempsey, *Metamodernism*, Discussion of Epistemic Bootstrapping and Perspective Toggling, p. 12-22.



1. Metamodern Christianity acknowledges the realities of doubt, ambiguity, complexity and paradox. In this context, faith is not a binary choice between belief or unbelief; it is an ongoing process, a dynamic oscillation between moments of certainty and moments of doubt. In this way, metamodern faith does not attempt to resolve all tensions; rather, it thrives in the midst of them.
2. In metamodern Christianity, sincerity and irony coexist. This reflects a kind of “informed naivety,” where individuals are aware of the complexities and contradictions of life, yet still choose to approach the world with sincerity and hope. This means that faith is not about blind belief or naive optimism. Instead, it is a conscious choice to have faith in something greater, even while acknowledging the reasons to doubt.
3. Metamodern Christianity reframes our understanding of hope in the face of despair. This is not a simplistic, triumphalist hope that ignores the reality of suffering; rather, it is a hope that is deeply informed by the complex processes that emerge within the brokenness of the world.
4. Metamodern Christianity understands history as a learning process in which tradition and revelation undergo an ongoing process of reinterpretation based upon new insights in theology, philosophy, science, and spiritual experience<sup>20</sup>. This includes a capacity to understand the way that the sacred is revealed differently throughout history, thus being eschatological in its orientation.
5. Metamodern faith communities are diverse in nature that welcome its members to bring their doubts, questions, and struggles, and find solidarity with others who are on a similar journey.
6. Metamodern Christianity is focussed primarily on transformation, rather than religious affiliation. This includes a willingness to be open to new understandings of divinity, even if this challenges one’s previous

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<sup>20</sup> Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 2011.

understanding of God<sup>21</sup>. This allows a space for one's spirituality to be deepened, nuanced, and reframed within new paradigms of faith that can better communicate the Christian message to a rapidly changing world.

7. Metamodern Christianity moves beyond both religious tribalism and the false binary between theism and atheism. By recognising the limits to human language and cognition, metamodern faith gives rise to a new kind of mysticism that acknowledges the ineffable source of reality. This is a dimension that is beyond words, concepts, images, labels, systems, institutions, culture and even religion itself. From this perspective, God or ultimate reality cannot be adequately named, claimed, contained or fully explained and is therefore beyond all categories of symbolisation, thus being free of idolatry and ideology.

In summary, Metamodern Christianity supports a faithful progression of Christ's message of the Kingdom of God that is historically appropriate for our current time in history. This is a movement that truly aspires to provide viable faith pathways for future generations whilst preserving the essential contributions of its historical tradition. This is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself who said that:

*“Every... disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom **new** treasures as well as **old**.” (Matthew 13:52).*

The End

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure – The Deconstruction of Christianity*, 2008, pp. 139-157.

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