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# essentials



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All of us have been shocked and perplexed by the horrific killings in Bondi last December. Both the event itself and the reactions and debates that followed have been complex, challenging and in some cases perplexing. This edition of Essentials has an article by Bishop Michael Stead on the implications of hate speech legislation. Michael has active engagement at multiple levels in this area and it's an important contribution. Most people will never have heard of Herbert Lum, but he heads up an important project to impact the way schools engage with the complexity of being multi-faith communities. David Williams has written an excellent article on apologetics and we have the stories of The Bridge Church in Sydney and TIMA Church in Melbourne, along with a number of book reviews.

STEPHEN HALE

CHAIR OF EFAC AUSTRALIA AND GENERAL SECRETARY OF EFAC GLOBAL

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3. To foster support and collaboration among evangelical Anglicans throughout Australia.
4. To function as a resource group to develop and encourage biblically faithful leadership in all spheres of life.
5. To provide a forum, where appropriate: a) for taking counsel together to develop policies and strategies in matters of common concern b) for articulating gospel distinctives in the area of faith, order, life and mission by consultations and publications.
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essentials



# Hate Speech laws threaten Religious Freedom

MICHAEL STEAD

Laws that outlaw speech are the biggest threat to religious freedom in Australia at the moment.

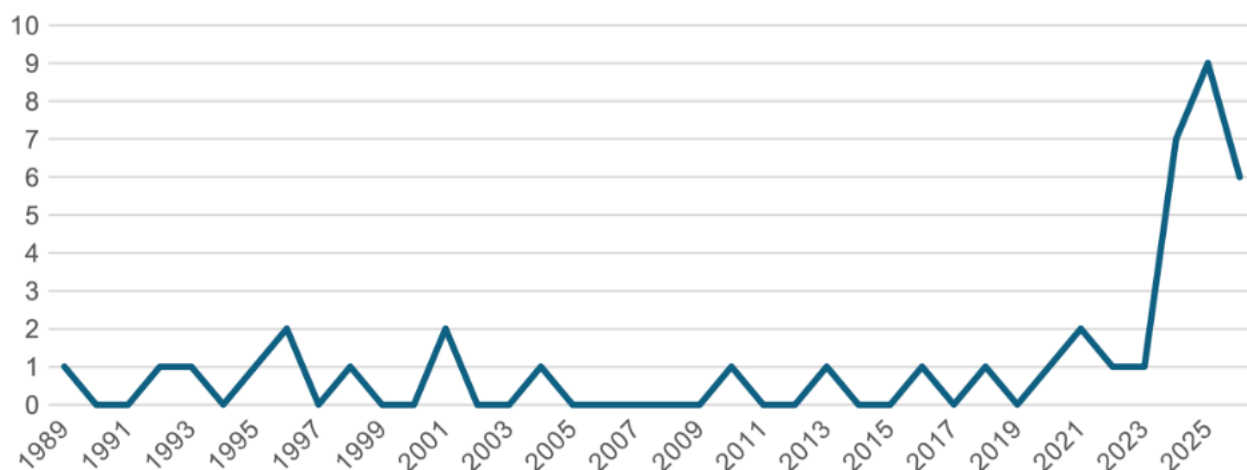
There has been a recent explosion of laws that restrict speech. In the 34 years from 1989-2023, there were 19 Bills that imposed restrictions on speech. The same number of Bills have been passed in the last 26 months.



Michael Stead

pictured

## Speech-based offences - 1989 - 2026



These new laws prohibit or regulate hate speech, vilification, right wing ideology, conversion practices and harmful online content.

The particular concern for religious freedom arises from moves to suppress speech merely on the basis that is hateful or offensive. Compounding this, in some jurisdictions this is assessed subjectively or from the perspective of a member of the target group. This means that hate speech becomes ‘speech that I find hateful’ and offensive speech is ‘speech that offends me’.

In the UK, it is a criminal offence to use an ‘electronic communications network’ (e.g., Facebook or WhatsApp) to send a message that is ‘grossly offensive’ or which is ‘for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety’.<sup>1</sup> In April 2025, the Times reported that

<sup>1</sup> Section 127 of the Communications Act 2003; non-digital communication is similarly covered by s.1 of the Malicious

the UK police were making 30 arrests a day for offensive online messages.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, under Section 4A of the Public Order Act 1986 it is a crime to use ‘threatening, abusive or insulting words’ ‘with intent to cause a person harassment, alarm or distress’. There were 11,876 prosecutions under this section in 2024/25.<sup>2</sup> There have been a wave of cases of Christian street-preachers who have been arrested under this provision, including for making biblical statements about homosexuality,<sup>3</sup> alleged ‘misgendering’<sup>4</sup> and for preaching criticising the Quran

Communications Act 1988.

<sup>1</sup> <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/select-communications-offences-and-concerns-over-free-speech/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/question/HL10453/public-order-offences-arrests-and-convictions>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christian.org.uk/case/john-craven/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://christianconcern.com/news/win-for-street-preacher-as-misgendering-conviction-overturned/>



that caused distress to Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The fact that in many cases the charges were eventually dropped does not undo the gross imposition on religious free speech at the point of arrest.

Criminalising so called ‘hate-speech’ is wrong, because it undercuts the principles of tolerance that underpin our western liberal democracy. It blurs the distinction between speech that is *awful* and speech that is *unlawful*.

Our laws impose two types of appropriate limits on speech.

The *criminal law* is the mechanism used by the state to protect people against attacks on themselves or their property. In the same way that attempting to commit a crime or conspiracy to commit a crime is subject to the same maximum penalty as the crime itself, speech that incites others to commit a crime is itself a crime, and speech that threatens a criminal act is itself a crime. But if the underlying action or position is *not* a crime, then speech advocating for that action or position should not be a crime either.

The *civil law* provides a mechanism to provide redress where the actions of one party have caused harm to another. This includes speech - what I say might have consequences in defamation law, intellectual property law and anti-discrimination law. Civil law doesn’t criminalise these kinds of speech. Rather, it holds people accountable for the consequences of their speech – for slanderous comments that cause reputational harm, for example.

But if speech is not criminal because it threatens a crime or incites a crime, and there isn’t a personal or economic harm caused by that speech that warrants civil redress, then the state does not have a role to play in regulating speech.

Instead, we must *tolerate* speech that is merely awful, but not unlawful. Tolerance is a core tenet of a liberal democracy. It is the decision not to prohibit or repress the words or actions of others that I find incorrect, undesirable or objectionable. It is captured aptly by the most famous thing Voltaire never said ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it’. Historically, this Enlightenment principle arose from a religious war in the 17th century. After 30 brutal years of Protestants and Catholics killing each other over religious beliefs, people realised that the imposition of faith by force cannot work, and that religious toleration of different beliefs was essential for society. Out of this

<sup>1</sup> <https://persecution.org/2025/03/14/british-preacher-who-publicly-criticized-quran-found-not-guilty-of-hate-crime/>

religious toleration develops the modern idea that freedom of thought, conscience and belief is intrinsic to what it is to be human.

The framework above highlights two key problems in recent legislative attempts to regulate speech.

#### **PROBLEM 1: CRIMINALISING SPEECH WHICH SHOULD NOT BE A CRIME.**

As noted above, Inciting violence is (and should be) a crime because violence is a crime. Inciting hatred should not be a crime, because it is not a crime to hate someone. Instead, inciting hatred – otherwise known as vilification – is (and should be) a civil offence (see further below).

However, there have been recent moves to introduce *criminal* vilification provisions. In response to rising antisemitism, the NSW Government added s.93ZAA to the Crimes Act. Section 93ZAA makes it an offence, punishable by up to 2 years in prison, to intentionally incite hatred on the ground of race causing a reasonable member of the target group to ‘fear harassment, intimidation or violence’ or ‘fear for [their] safety.’

A criminal provision for hate crimes should not be determined by the fear of a reasonable member of the target group. It is unclear whether the breadth of ‘harassment, intimidation or violence’ include subjective psychological states or feelings – e.g, ‘I felt intimidated’ or ‘I felt harassed’. If so, then preachers beware! Suppose a preacher proclaims ‘Jesus is the only way to salvation. Being a Muslim won’t save you. Being Jewish won’t save you’. Would a reasonable Jew be ‘fearful’ about their eternal salvation, or feel intimidated by this? If so, then the preacher has committed a criminal offence. Section 93ZAA criminalises the exclusive claims to eternal salvation of different religions.





This concern is compounded if the protected attributes are expanded beyond race to include sexual orientation and gender identity. Traditional Biblical teaching on sexual ethics might be viewed by a member of the LGBTIQ+ community as ‘intimidating’ or ‘harassing’, but this does not therefore make it appropriate to restrict free speech or the ability of a Christian church, school or parents from teaching or preaching in accordance with their doctrines, tenets and beliefs.

In January 2026, the Federal government also sought to introduce a criminal vilification provision as part of the Combatting Antisemitism Hate Extremism Bill 2026. Section 80.2BF made it an offence, punishable by up to 5 years imprisonment, to publicly promote or incite racial hatred, where ‘conduct would, in all the circumstances, cause a reasonable person who is the target, or a member of the target group, *to be intimidated, to fear harassment or violence, or to fear for their safety.*’ It is extraordinary that a sentence of imprisonment of up to 5 years could arise from speech that a person merely regards as ‘intimidating’ or ‘harassing’. Like section 93ZAA, this clause was directed at racial vilification, but government ministers signalled a willingness for this to be expanded to other protected attributes.

This caused provoked widespread opposition from faith leaders and free-speech advocates, and this part of the Bill was withdrawn by the government.

## **PROBLEM 2: ‘LOW BAR’ CIVIL OFFENCES FOR SPEECH OFFENCES.**

Traditionally, civil vilification laws had a ‘high bar’. Legislation defines vilification to mean inciting hatred, serious contempt or severe ridicule. The high threshold established by this test is consistent with the role of the civil law – to provide redress where someone’s actions cause direct and material harm to another person. The law does not – and should not – exist to protect us against hurt feelings or being offended.

But there are unfortunate examples where legislators have got this wrong and made it an offence to offend or insult.

In 1995, s.18C was added to the Racial Discrimination Act. Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act makes it unlawful for someone to do an act that is reasonably likely to ‘*offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate*’ someone because of their race or ethnicity.

Section 17 of the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Act 1998 prohibits ‘conduct which *offends, humiliates, intimidates, insults* or ridicules another person’ where a

‘reasonable person... would have anticipated that the other person would be offended, humiliated, intimidated, insulted or ridiculed.’ In 2014, the range of protected attributes in the Act was expanded to include, for example, gender identity. This enabled Martine Delaney, a transgender activist and Greens candidate to lodge a complaint with the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commission in late 2015 against Tasmanian Catholic Archbishop Julian Porteous. The complaint was in relation to the distribution by Porteous of a leaflet entitled Don’t Mess with Marriage to the families of those attending Catholic school in Tasmania, to inform them of the church’s position on the meaning of marriage. The complaints process limited Archbishop Porteous’ ability to participate in advocating for the Catholic doctrine of marriage in the public square in the lead up to the postal vote about same-sex marriage. The complaints process dragged on for 9 months, until it was withdrawn by the complainant.<sup>1</sup>

‘Insult’ and ‘offend’ provisions such as these are used by activists to silence Christians in the public square. They encourage confected outrage so as to claim victim status, which then engages the machinery of the complaints process against an opponent. Even if the complaint is ultimately unsuccessful, the process is the punishment.

As Christians, what should we do in response to laws like this that threaten religious freedom?

We should strenuously oppose laws that inappropriately restrict speech. Neither criminal nor civil law should be used to impose a particular vision of the social good. We have to preserve the space for legitimate disagreement and dissent. Laws restricting speech should not be used to impose a uniformity of ideology regarding the world.

The right response to the awful speech is not to make it unlawful, and not to suppress it by deplatforming people or ‘take down’ orders for online content, but to counter it with good speech. A commitment to free speech entails a commitment to robust public debate with civility that is prepared to call out awful speech. A commitment to tolerance doesn’t mean that we applaud bad speech or stand passively on the sidelines.

The antidote to bad speech is not to suppress it but to challenge it in the free market of ideas through robust public debate, so that the truth may prevail.

## **The Right Reverend Dr Michael Stead is Bishop of South Sydney**

<sup>1</sup> <https://australiawatch.com.au/archbishop-julian-porteous/>



# Seeking the Welfare of the City: Religious Literacy, Love of Neighbour and Social Cohesion

HERBERT UM

*“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7)*

For generations, evangelicals have wrestled with what it means to be faithful in societies that do not share their convictions. Jeremiah’s instruction to Israel in exile remains instructive. God’s people are not called to withdraw from the life of the city, nor to dominate it, but to seek its shalom - its peace, wholeness and flourishing. What might that look like in contemporary Australia?

In the months following the tragedy at Bondi, religion has once again returned to the centre of public conversation. Questions about extremism, belief and social cohesion have resurfaced with urgency. While investigations continue and public debate unfolds, one thing has become clear: Australians are grappling with how religion fits within our shared civic life.

In moments like these, immediate responses are necessary. Remediation, reassurance and action to quell fear and insecurity are essential in the present. Yet we must also ask a deeper question. Beyond today’s response, what longer-term strategy are we investing in to shape the next generation of Australian school students to be better equipped in intercultural and interfaith understanding?

Moments of crisis often expose deeper currents. Beyond the headlines lies a quieter and more enduring challenge. Australia has become more religiously diverse and less religiously literate at the same time. We live in one of the



Herbert Um

pictured

most multicultural societies in the world. In our suburbs and classrooms, students encounter Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism, secular humanism and many other belief systems as part of ordinary daily life. Yet many lack even a basic understanding of what these traditions actually teach, how they shape identity, and why they matter so deeply to those who hold them.

In the absence of informed engagement, stereotypes and misunderstandings tend to fill the void. Religion is often encountered through headlines or moments of crisis rather than through careful explanation. As a result, rich and complex traditions that shape millions of lives are quickly reduced to simplistic narratives, and unfamiliar beliefs seem threatening rather than merely unfamiliar.

This challenge is intensified by the role of social and mainstream media. Research into Australian media representation shows that religion is frequently framed through narrow institutional lenses and often associated with controversy or moral conflict.<sup>1</sup> Media processes do not merely report religion; they construct and sustain public perceptions of it. As religious literacy within journalism declines, complex faith traditions are easily reduced to simplified narratives. In an age of rapid communication, stereotypes can travel further than careful explanation.

As someone born in Australia to South Korean immigrants, I have long been aware of the complexity of belonging. Growing up between cultures sharpened my sensitivity to questions of identity, meaning and purpose, questions that many young Australians are now navigating

<sup>1</sup> Enqi Weng, *Media Perceptions of Religious Changes in Australia: Of Dominance and Diversity*, 1st ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).





in their own way. These challenges are not theoretical; they are lived daily in families, communities and classrooms.

Schools and classrooms are where this reality is most visible. Teachers recognise that religions and worldviews shape the lives of many of their students, yet many feel under-equipped to address these topics with confidence. With increasing curriculum demands, administrative pressures and complex behavioural challenges, engaging thoughtfully with religion can feel daunting. This is not limited to government schools. Across the education sector (Government, Independent and Catholic), leaders and educators are asking how best to prepare young Australians to live well in a religiously diverse society.

In this environment, the classroom becomes one of the few shared spaces where young people can engage religion critically, carefully and constructively, building bridges of intercultural and interfaith understanding.

How we address these challenges will have a lasting impact on how our young people and future leaders understand their place in the world and, just as importantly, how they engage with others for the common good.

These questions are not only external. Within Christianity in Australia, 24% of churchgoers speak a language other than English at home and 37% were born overseas, which highlights the rich cultural and linguistic diversity among Christians here.<sup>1</sup> Our own diversity of language and culture prompts us to ask how well we have bridged differences within our own communities.

### **ILLITERACY, TRUST AND THE FRAGILITY OF FREEDOM**

One such challenge for our educators and students is coming to terms with the reality that ‘nobody stands nowhere’.<sup>2</sup> There is no neutral vantage point from which to observe religion as well as other non-religious worldviews. When religious literacy is absent, neutrality does not emerge. What emerges is stereotypes and misrepresentations of the ‘other’. This can leave our young people without the opportunity to critically examine the various worldviews that shape Australian society. It also can leave them without a framework to better understand their own personal worldviews as well as the worldviews of those around them.

<sup>1</sup> NCLS Research, Australian Church Attendance Report (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Theos Think Tank, “Nobody Stands Nowhere,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFRxKF-Jdos>.

Yet there is reason for encouragement.

Research into the religious literacy of Australia’s Generation Z suggests that many young people are not hostile to religion, but curious. They express openness to learning about diverse beliefs and recognise that such education can strengthen diversity and social inclusion.<sup>1</sup> They are growing up in plural environments and are generally comfortable with difference.

Yet curiosity alone does not guarantee understanding. Openness creates the opportunity. Formation is what shapes the outcome.

The same national study found that students who had received General Religious Education (GRE) demonstrated significantly more positive views toward Australia’s religious minorities. By contrast, students who had received no GRE were approximately twice as likely to hold neutral or negative perceptions, even when controlling for age, gender, school type, socio-economic background and religious identity.<sup>2</sup> The findings suggest that structured engagement with religion in the classroom is associated with greater social inclusion and reduced prejudice.

If young Australians are to live well in a religiously diverse society, they must be formed not merely in tolerance, but in understanding. Generation Z’s openness suggests that such formation would not be imposed upon them, but welcomed.

Research into student wellbeing reinforces this. A strong sense of belonging is closely linked to academic success and mental health.<sup>3</sup> When students feel seen and respected, they flourish. Religious literacy, delivered with care and rigour, can contribute to that belonging by equipping students to navigate difference with confidence rather than fear. In other words, understanding appears to shape attitudes.

This matters because in a plural democracy, misunderstanding does more than create discomfort; it

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Singleton et al., *The Religious Literacy of Australia’s Gen Z Teens: Diversity and Social Inclusion* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Singleton et al., *The Religious Literacy of Australia’s Gen Z Teens: Diversity and Social Inclusion* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> University of Technology Sydney, “Sense of Belonging Helps Students Thrive at School,” <https://www.uts.edu.au/for-industry/how-to-partner-with-uts/giving/impact-of-giving/sense-of-belonging-helps-students-thrive-at-school>.



erodes trust. Trust is the fabric of social cohesion. It binds citizens to shared institutions and public norms. When trust weakens, suspicion hardens and division deepens.

In his 2025 Lowy Lecture, ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess warned: “You cannot spy your way to greater cohesion or arrest your way to fewer grievances. It requires a whole of community, whole of society response... Every one of us has a role to play protecting our social cohesion. In an age with unprecedented avenues for communication, I fear we are losing our ability to converse — or at least losing the ability to converse with civility, debate with respect, disagree with restraint. To have an exchange of ideas rather than an exchange of diatribes or slogans or rhetorical blows. To be right without being righteous. To compromise.”<sup>1</sup>

His warning is instructive. Social cohesion cannot be enforced. It must be cultivated through our interactions with one another, across tribal lines and throughout our institutions.

Religious freedom, in this context, is sustained not only by law but by understanding. Where understanding is thin, freedom becomes fragile.

### **LOVING GOD, LOVING NEIGHBOUR AND SEEKING SHALOM**

For Christians, this moment is an opportunity for faithful engagement underpinned with theological clarity.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he replied: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... and love your neighbour as yourself*” (Matthew 22:37–39). These twin commands shape not only private devotion, but public engagement.

To love God is to honour truth. To love our neighbour is to seek their good. In a diverse society, that includes pursuing understanding rather than stereotyping, and building trust rather than suspicion.

Jeremiah’s call to seek the shalom of the city reminds us that God’s people flourish when the society around them flourishes. Shalom is more than the absence of conflict; it is the presence of right relationships with God and with one another.

<sup>1</sup> Mike Burgess, “Lowy Lecture,” Lowy Institute, 2025. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/2025-lowy-lecture-delivered-director-general-security-mike-burgess-am>

The apostle Paul offers a compelling example in Acts 17. In Athens, surrounded by unfamiliar beliefs and practices, Paul did not retreat in fear nor respond with hostility. He observed carefully. He reasoned thoughtfully. He quoted local poets. He began from shared understanding before proclaiming truth. His engagement was informed, attentive and confident. Careful study of other beliefs was not a compromise of faith; it was an expression of love and clarity.

Our confidence in such engagement rests in the Lordship of Christ. As Abraham Kuyper famously declared, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” Yet Christ’s Lordship is not a mandate for control, but a call to faithful service. If he is Lord over every sphere of life including education and public discourse, then our presence in those spheres should be marked not by domination, but by humility, integrity and love.

Every person bears the image of God (Genesis 1:27). To diminish another through stereotype or hostility is to forget that dignity. The virtues that sustain a healthy democracy such as humility, patience, courage and self-restraint are not accidental social conventions. They are rooted in the Christian vision of shalom and are embodied in the life of Christ himself.

If misunderstanding erodes trust, and trust undergirds social cohesion, then investing in understanding is one practical way Christians can love their neighbour and seek the peace of the city.

### **A COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE: FAITH VALUES AND RWE**

Faith Values is a Melbourne-based Christian not-for-profit organisation working with multifaith communities to help educators engage their students with diverse worldviews, beliefs and religions – strengthening community connections and social cohesion through informed, respectful dialogue. Our vision is to see every student in Australia provided quality curriculum-aligned Religions and Worldviews Education to contribute towards flourishing cohesive multicultural and multifaith society.

For the past five years, Faith Values has served as the secretariat for the Multi-Faith Education Collaboration (MFEC), convening leaders from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and other faith communities, alongside multicultural organisations. Auspiced by the Faith Communities Council of Victoria, Victoria’s peak multifaith body, this collaboration reflects a shared



commitment to strengthening social cohesion through education.

Through sustained dialogue and trust-building, MFEC has worked to move beyond reactive debates about religion in schools toward constructive solutions grounded in educational best practice.

Out of this collaboration emerged the Religions and Worldviews Education (RWE) initiative.

RWE draws on a worldviews approach that recognises every individual, whether religious or not, interprets life through a framework of beliefs, values and assumptions. Rather than reducing religions to static doctrines, it invites students to explore the “big questions” of human existence: How do we see the world? What is life all about? What is right and what’s wrong? How do I right my wrongs? What responsibilities do I have? What do people believe about a spiritual world?

The pilot unit is aligned with the Australian and Victorian Curriculum, particularly Civics and Citizenship and the General Capabilities. At its heart is a pressing civic question: How do we get along well living in a diverse society?

Students are not merely asked to learn about religions. They are equipped to disagree well, to articulate convictions clearly, listen respectfully and engage difference without hostility. And the impact is already visible.

One teacher recently shared that after a lesson, a student from a Sikh background approached her quietly and said, “I saw myself for the first time in the classroom.” For that student, learning about worldviews was not abstract theory, it was recognition. It was belonging.

Other students have said:

- “It made me think more critically about how media influences our beliefs.”
- “It made me think about how everyone sees things differently depending on their background or position.”
- “It helped me understand that our views are often shaped by where we come from.”

Teachers have responded similarly:

- “These resources are long overdue.”
- “I appreciated how each lesson was framed around a big question.”
- “The academic background underpinning the worldviews approach gives confidence.”

When education leads to belonging, something of shalom is glimpsed; not uniformity, but mutual recognition.

The RWE pilot is delivered in partnership with the University of Melbourne’s Faculty of Education supporting independent evaluation. Support from Templeton World Charity Foundation, Collier Charitable Foundation and others has enabled pilot curriculum resource development, professional learning and structured research. Schools across sectors are now being invited to participate in the pilot phase.

This is not an attempt to privilege religion or blur theological distinctives. It is a response to a literacy gap. It recognises that students are already navigating complex questions of belief. The classroom can either leave those questions unexplored and silenced, or engage them with intellectual rigour and care.

#### A HOPEFUL INVITATION

Shalom does not emerge automatically. It must be pursued. If we desire an Australia where freedom is resilient, where disagreement does not devolve into division, and where communities flourish together, then investing in religious literacy is one way we obey Christ’s command to love God and love our neighbour.

So, I invite you pray for our schools. Pray for students navigating identity in a complex age. Pray for our educators as they navigate complex classrooms and carry the responsibility of shaping young minds. Pray for wisdom for those engaged in the work of RWE. Pray for openness and favour as Faith Values seeks to serve in this space.

To learn more about Faith Values and the Religions and Worldviews Education initiative, visit our websites and explore the pilot program underway. In seeking the welfare of the city, we trust that even small, faithful acts including investing in understanding will contribute to God’s larger work of shalom in our society.

**Herbert Um is the CEO of Faith Values ([faithvalues.org.au](http://faithvalues.org.au)), a Melbourne-based Christian not-for-profit organisation committed to strengthening quality Religions and Worldviews Education in Australian schools. He is the Project Director of Religions and Worldviews Education ([reworldviews.org.au](http://reworldviews.org.au)) and serves as secretariat to the Multi-Faith Education Collaboration. He is currently undertaking a Master of Theological Studies at Ridley College.**



# Can You Imagine God? Apologetics in an Age of Authenticity

DAVID WILLIAMS



David Williams

pictured

What is the essence of a human being? This is an important question, not least because our answer will shape our approach to evangelism and discipleship. The Enlightenment project conceptualised us as thinking beings. Our rationality and thought processes were the core of who we are, hence Rene Descartes' famous dictum "I think, therefore I am." James K.A. Smith has challenged this rationalist assumption and suggests that humans are driven more by our desires than our thoughts – "I am what I love"<sup>1</sup>. He argues that we are embodied people whose lives are focused towards an ultimate end, taking us on a journey guided by what we love. At the same time, we are also people who believe – who have hopes and dreams, who have faith.

The reality, of course, is that my thinking, believing and loving are bound together in one body, a person made in the image of God. Rather than try to separate these themes out, (a very Enlightenment project to classify and put things in boxes), we should hold them together.

This article addresses ways in which we might engage in apologetics to reflect this nature of our humanity. We will begin with a definition of apologetics and explore alternative approaches. But first ...

## A STORY

James has been praying for his friend for years, but opportunities to talk about the Lord Jesus have been hard to find. One day, quite out of the blue, James's friend asks, "Why do you believe in God?" James is about to launch into a logical argument for the existence of God, based on creation and revelation. But something makes him pause. Instead, he says "Why do you ask?" His friend replies: "You seem a nice person, but the Church is such a dreadful institution with its endless abuse scandals."

James's friend might equally well have replied: "You seem so content, your family is great, I can't imagine why you have this need for God." Or "you seem quite intelligent, but belief in God makes no rational sense to me." The answer that James needs to give to his friend will depend

on the question behind the question and reflect different approaches to apologetics.

## APOLOGETICS

Apologetics has been defined as "the branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith"<sup>1</sup>. It is "an apologia for the Christian faith – a presentation and defence of its claims to truth and relevance in the great market-place of ideas"<sup>2</sup>.

Using these definitions, it is easy to see that apologetics fits well into a world that preferences rationality and is concerned that we get our thinking straight. This approach to apologetics fits into the culture of modernity, a culture that sought to establish and understand the truth.

My own early discipleship, in the 1980's, included a great deal of useful and practical training in apologetics. We were equipped using resources like Paul Little's *Know Why You Believe*<sup>3</sup>, which was voted one of the 50 most influential books in the evangelical world in 2006. We thought carefully about shaping answers to questions that our friends were asking. It was wonderfully useful, because our friends were asking exactly these questions. One of the principle evangelistic tools of the early 1980's was dialogue evangelism supper parties. We invited our friends over for a meal and then gave them an opportunity to ask questions of a guest speaker. Friends came and duly asked their questions. Some became Christians. In many ways, apologetics was our bread and butter. For many EFAC

<sup>1</sup> Smith, James K.A. 2009. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, World-view, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI).

<sup>1</sup> Craig, William Lane. 2008. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Crossway: Wheaton, IL) p15

<sup>2</sup> McGrath, Alister. 1992. *Bridge Building: Communicating Christianity Effectively* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove IL).

<sup>3</sup> Little, Paul E. 2008. *Know Why You Believe* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove IL).



readers, apologetics has been a key part of our journey as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

## LATE MODERNITY

In 2026, however, we live in late modernity. This is a very different culture to my world of the 1980's. We live in the age of authenticity where people are pursuing their own sense of flourishing and self-fulfilment without reference to God<sup>1</sup>. For many people, this sense of flourishing comes from finding and expressing our own unique sense of individuality. We are in the age of authenticity not because we are trying to be true to an external standard, but because we are being true to ourselves. I am true to myself by expressing the special and unique person that I am – the world of expressive individualism.

In 2016, late modernity gave birth to post-truth politics, where it does not matter if politicians make claims that are untrue so long as those claims resonate with how I feel the world is for me.

People in a post-truth world are more interested in personal freedom than objective truth. They tend to be sceptical about big institutions, such as the church, but optimistic about an individual's ability to know what is best for themselves. Rather than conforming to external standards such as society or traditional family values or religious traditions, authenticity values my feelings, my creativity and my unique way of living my own life. What does apologetics look like in late modernity?

## APOLOGETICS AND THE IMAGINATION

Justin Ariel Bailey suggests two other ways that we can think about apologetics in our late modern world, in addition to the historic approach<sup>2</sup>. The first of these is what Bailey calls church-oriented apologetics, where “the church’s communal witness and proclamation of the gospel” defends and promotes Christian faith to a watching world<sup>3</sup>. If the historic approach to apologetics is challenging the unbeliever to ‘think it through’, church-oriented apologetics invites the unbeliever to ‘come and see’. This approach echoes Leslie Newbigin’s argument that the local church is the hermeneutic of the gospel<sup>4</sup>, and is rooted in the words of the Lord Jesus: “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*” (John 13:35).

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA)

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, Justin Ariel. 2020. *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove IL).

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, p58.

<sup>4</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie. 1989. *The Gospel in a pluralist society* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI). Chapter 18.

The practical demonstration of self-sacrificing love became a compelling witness for the early church, exemplified by the Roman Emperor Julian’s exasperation at the way Christians cared for the poor.<sup>1</sup> The sacrificial love demonstrated by God’s people to a wider world remains compelling in 2026. However, we face challenges in this area. In many Western cultures, churches are considered a force for harm in society, so that our witness is easily misconstrued. And sadly, our witness is terribly mixed: it seems that despite many everyday acts of love by ordinary Christians, there are regular abuse scandals from Christian leaders that discredit the gospel.

The second approach to apologetics that Bailey focuses on is “the apologetics of authenticity: an apologetic that begins by exploring our intuitive and imaginative sense of our place in the world, locating the appeal of faith in the aesthetic dimension”<sup>2</sup>. Rather than ‘think it through’ or ‘come and see’ this approach asks the unbeliever ‘can you imagine?’ Bailey’s approach is based on a conviction that in the late modern world, the challenge we face is not just loss of belief, but a fundamental change in the way belief is conceived. As we’ve already seen, we have moved from a world where ‘if something is true you should believe it’ to world where ‘if something is untrue, you can still believe it if it feels right’. Bailey shows that in late modernity the conditions under which belief is even considered possible have changed. Faith must first be imaginable before it can be arguable. This in turn relates to Smith’s argument that we are what we love. If people are formed more by what they love than by what they argue, then apologetics must also address the visions of the good life that are being offered by our culture’s rival

<sup>1</sup> See for example: [Amid Plague, their “Deeds Were on Everyone’s Lips”: How Christianity Conquered Rome - BibleMesh](#)

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, p58.





liturgies. For Smith, going to the shopping mall is a cultural liturgy that shapes and forms us to imagine that consumption will satisfy us. Can we imagine something different?

Bailey suggests that just as our minds are God-given, impacted by sin, but capable with God's help of understanding God's truth; so, our imaginations are God-given, impacted by sin, but capable with God's help of imagining God's beauty. This approach to apologetics seeks to enable people to imagine the world as belonging to God. Or as C.S. Lewis put it, to allow our eyes to travel up the sunbeam to see the sun<sup>1</sup>. The imagination does not replace revelation; it is the faculty by which, with God's help, it becomes possible to engage with revelation.

The apologetics of authenticity engages with human beings as people who love, people who desire a better future. It aims to show that believing in God is beautiful and opens hopes and dreams that are worth living for. It wants to help people imagine a world where faith in Jesus makes sense of life. One way to engage people's imaginations is to share Bible stories with them, to invite them into narratives that shows the majesty and beauty of the Lord Jesus. Storytelling is a useful tool, but the apologetics of authenticity is about more than this. It aims

<sup>1</sup>Lewis, Clive Staples. 1964. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Geoffrey Bles: London).

to help people imagine a world in which grace, forgiveness, transcendence and hope are even possible. This is not simply preparing the ground for later rational argument, but a way in which the truth of the gospel is encountered as good and real.

## CONCLUSION

When James's friend asks him, "Why do you believe in God?", James is wise to pause and establish the question behind the question. Perhaps his friend thinks that faith is irrational and lacks an evidential base, in which case traditional apologetics will help James a great deal. But if the question is generated by a sense that the church has been a force for harm in society, then James might do better to invite his friend to come and visit his local church's social outreach. And if the question is a bemused wondering about why on earth anyone could possibly believe anything in 2026, then the apologetics of authenticity might be the way to go. James might reply to the question "Why do you believe in God?" by saying "Can I tell you a story..." In each case, whether through rational argument, modelling love, or engaging the imagination, it is the Holy Spirit who opens blind eyes, not merely better techniques.

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# The Story of TIMA: Planting New Life in Old Pots — The Vision and Practice of "Church Repotting"

BEN WONG



Ben Wong

pictured

In Melbourne's eastern suburbs, there is a developing Anglican parish — TIMA Anglican Parish. TIMA is composed of three churches: St Timothy's Bulleen, St Mark's Templestowe Lower, and St Stephen's Greythorn. Across three locations and five services (two English, two Mandarin, and one Cantonese), congregants of different languages and generations are being reconnected under a single vision: not to give up on traditional churches, but to replant the "new life" of the Gospel mission within the "old pots" of existing churches.

## I. BACKGROUND: WHEN ANGLICAN CHURCHES FACE DECLINE, IS "CLOSING DOWN" THE ONLY OPTION?

Over a decade ago, God began to show Ben Wong and a small team of coworkers a clear reality: many traditional local churches were facing structural dilemmas. This was not a problem unique to a single site, but a widespread phenomenon.

### Observed Realities:

- Continuous decline in attendance.
- Lack of outreach ministries and adult baptisms.
- An ageing congregation.
- A lack of next-generation church leaders.
- Difficulty in developing the small local church model: Churches are bogged down by a heavy load of non-Gospel tasks (compliance, governance, OHS, child safety, property management, etc.). In small churches, a single pastor often handles administration, management, and pastoring alone. Consequently, they can at most "maintain services," making it difficult to refresh children's and youth ministries, let alone talk about church planting or missions.

The most heart-wrenching result is that when a church can no longer sustain itself, it often moves toward being sold. Many church sites are actually located in dense residential areas; once the land is lost, even if God revives the city in the future, it will be very difficult for the church to return to that community because the location no longer exists.

This is not just a reduction in the number of churches, but also:

- The permanent loss of land and Gospel outposts in residential areas.
- A continuous decline in the church's influence on society.

In this situation, we began to ask a question: **Does God really want us to watch churches disappear one by one?**

## II. VISION: CHURCH REPOTTING — STARTING NEW MINISTRY IN OLD CHURCHES

The core vision God gave TIMA is: Church Repotting. "Repotting" is a very relatable image from daily life: when a plant stops growing and loses its vitality, we don't necessarily throw it away. Instead, we can keep the same pot, refresh the soil, and plant a new plant inside so that life can grow again.

Similarly, we believe:

- God is not looking to discard His church, but to renew His church.
- He is bringing new life, new missions, and a new generation of people into places that seem dry and weary, making them Gospel centres in the community once more.

### TIMA's articulation of "Church Repotting" is:

"A dynamic network of flourishing churches, energised by the innovative initiative of 'Church Repotting'—a platform dedicated to fostering and nurturing new ministries within established yet declining churches. Through the process of 'repotting,' these churches are envisioned to not only survive but thrive, evolving into vibrant centres of faith and service."

## III. THE STORY: FROM A SMALL CHURCH OF 20+ PEOPLE, GOD LEADS THE WAY TO UNITY



### 1) 2014: The Starting Point at St Timothy's

A Small Site, a New Beginning In 2014, Ben Wong was appointed as the Vicar of St Timothy's Bulleen. At the time, the church had only one elderly English congregation of about 20 people. The site was small, with a maximum capacity of about 100 people.

While maintaining the original English service, Ben and a small team of about six people started a new Mandarin ministry. It was a beginning of faith: without resources or scale, they relied on God's calling and vision, hoping to launch new pastoring and mission work within the old church.

### 2) 2019–2022: Two Churches Move Toward Partnership, then Merger

By 2019, St Timothy's began to face limitations in space and ministry development. God also led us to begin communicating with nearby St Mark's Templestowe Lower (the two churches are a four-minute drive apart).

At the time, St Mark's was still financially healthy but faced the same challenges of an ageing congregation and a lack of a new generation. The two sites began to wonder: could working together make each other stronger?

We gradually saw an important direction: If two small churches could unite to become a multi-staff parish, they would be more powerful than two churches fighting alone. The 2020 pandemic was an opportunity. The two churches collaborated on live-streaming services. The young people from St Timothy's were able to use the equipment for the livestream, which was very important for elderly Christians during the lockdown. The congregants got to know each other better, and the partnership deepened as a result.

In 2021, the two churches officially entered a three-year Partnership Agreement, originally planning to blend slowly. However, after only one year, the congregants clearly saw the benefits of unity and even proactively suggested that there was no need to wait three years—they could merge immediately.

In 2022, both churches passed the merger with a 100% vote, officially establishing TIMA Anglican Parish. The name includes the "Ti" from St Timothy's and the "Ma" from St Mark's. More importantly, TIMA is an ancient Greek word meaning "honour." We hope to be a church that honours God.

### 3) 2022: A Third Church Joins — Seemingly Unwise, but Like a Calling Placed at the Door

Shortly after the merger, nearby St Stephen's Greythorn entered a stage of "possible closure." From a human perspective, it seemed unwise to merge another church within three months of just completing one merger.

But we also asked: **Why has God placed this at our doorstep? Is this directly related to the "Repotting" vision?**

After prayer and discussion, the entire church passed the merger with "only one dissenting vote," and St Stephen's joined TIMA. Today, TIMA has become a parish of three locations and five services, learning to move forward under the same vision across different sites and language groups.

## IV. STRATEGY: RESPONDING TO NEW ERA CHALLENGES WITH "MERGE-INTEGRATE-SEND"

TIMA's repotting strategy is not simply about "getting big," but about establishing a model that can be healthy long-term and capable of continuous sending.

### 1) Establishing a Multi-staff Parish: Centralising Administration to Release Pastors for Gospel Work

Many ageing small churches today face a common dilemma: they can often only afford to hire one pastor. However, besides Sunday services and daily pastoring, the pastor must spend a huge amount of time handling increasingly complex compliance and governance requirements that are updated annually. With an elderly and limited congregation, it is also difficult to find enough suitable volunteers to share the load. As a result, the church can barely maintain itself, making it hard to launch new Gospel ministries.

Therefore, the direction we are trying is merging nearby sites to establish a **multi-staff parish**. The Vicar centralises the primary administration and overall governance, while the other pastors can focus more on pastoring specific services and groups. Meanwhile, each service still retains its own characteristics and culture, continuing to serve people of different languages, cultures, and backgrounds.

Under this structure, we also face a very practical pastoral issue: how to integrate existing ageing services. Many ageing services do not have many people, yet they are scattered across different locations. Congregants' resistance to merging is often not out of rational calculation, but out of emotion and belonging—the fear of losing the church building that has accompanied them for many years, especially when relatives or spouses are buried in the church's memorial garden; this connection is deep and hard to sever.

"Church Repotting" is not simply about "moving" the old members away; they have not lost their original church building. Nor is it just to maintain things for a few more years. The original church becomes part of a larger church; the elderly congregants still "own" it and have not "lost" it. When several originally scattered and weak ageing services are integrated, the numbers increase, relationships become closer, and more resources and vitality are naturally generated.



After merging the existing ageing services, the ideal service time slots can be reserved for the newly "replanted" services to better connect with the community.

## 2) Integrating Next-Generation Ministry: One Team Serving Multiple Service Groups

- **Children's Sunday School:** Each service still retains children's ministry, but teaching resources and training can be centrally coordinated, making quality and continuity more stable.
- **Youth Ministry:** TIMA's Friday youth ministry is composed of young people from the English, Cantonese, and Mandarin services. If the previous three churches were still operating independently, they would need three sets of youth cultivation systems; now, one youth ministry can serve the groups from all three locations.
- **The Rise of the Fifth Service:** The fifth service TIMA started this year is composed of teenagers from different services who have grown up into young adults. This group mostly comes from first-generation immigrant families but possesses Australian culture and a local English context. The service they have established in the parish serves the next generation (not limited to immigrant groups), where issues of language, race, and culture will no longer exist. Consequently, even if certain services age or even need to close due to changes in migration waves or other reasons, this young adult community will quickly become the main force of TIMA, supporting the long-term development of the parish.

## 3) Not Pursuing Megachurch Services, but Using "100 People" as a Healthy Unit

The goal of repotting is to establish new services within old churches so the church can maintain, renew, and reconnect with the community. Therefore, our ideal is not to concentrate everyone into one super-large service, but rather:

- Each service develops to about 100 people: This fits the site capacity of most local churches and keeps community relationships close.
- If it reaches about 120 people: We begin to prepare to send and repot new ministries, giving the original service room to continue growing while extending the mission of church repotting.
- This ensures growth doesn't get stuck in the painful transition of "moving from small to medium," but instead continues the mission and renewal through sending.

## V. CHALLENGES: REPOTTING IS NOT A SLOGAN, BUT A PATH REQUIRING FAITH AND SACRIFICE

We are very clear that church repotting is not an easy path. The challenges TIMA currently faces include:

### 1) The Challenge of Vision Communication

Because TIMA has multiple services led by different pastors, the overall church vision and methods must be very clear to ensure that although congregants are scattered across different sites, they are still moving in the same direction. This means that the ministry team must first be united in their vision for the church.

### 2) The Difficulty of "Early Establishment"

Many ageing churches are unwilling to change or accept new management or merger models as long as they can





barely maintain themselves. The result is often waiting until resources are exhausted and being forced to let go, which means new ministries require greater cost and energy to be re-established. TIMA's first two churches are a positive example of two healthy small churches coming together to become a healthier church.

### 3) Lack of Training and Workers

Repotting needs new church planters and leaders, which requires:

- Recruiting the right people.
- Providing theological and practical training.
- Building healthy spiritual character and team culture.

Therefore, within TIMA, there is a ministry called the **Neoshoot Network**, whose main work is church planting and training church planters.

### 4) Need for Resources and Support

Church planting and repotting require money, manpower, administrative support, and long-term companionship. This also means we need more cross-site and cross-parish cooperation and support.

## VI. THE FUTURE: FROM "ONE PARISH" TOWARD A "RESOURCING CHURCH," SUPPORTING MORE REPOTTING

TIMA has completed the first phase of repotting: establishing a three-site parish structure. Currently, while each service is self-sustaining, there is still room for growth.

In the next step, our goal is not to endlessly expand the number of TIMA locations. Conversely, as the ministries at the three sites gradually expand healthily, we hope TIMA becomes a resourcing church, sharing the models, structures, and experiences God has built among us with other struggling small churches.

We look forward to being able to do the following outside the TIMA parish in the future:

- Assist other churches in establishing similar multi-staff parish structures.
- Provide feasible models for governance and administrative support.
- Release pastors and congregants back to the core of the Gospel mission.
- Ensure more "old pots" are not discarded but renewed, becoming Gospel outposts once again.

Although TIMA itself is still in a stage of exploration and has much room for growth, this does not affect our practice of the vision God gave us: church repotting. We have already prepared a church planting team and will launch repotting ministries outside of TIMA in 2026, expecting TIMA and the churches about to be replanted to grow healthily at the same time.

### CONCLUSION: GOD IS NOT ENDING HIS CHURCH, HE IS RENEWING HIS CHURCH

The story of TIMA cannot yet be considered a "success case," but is a journey still in progress: we see the reality of decline, and we also see the hope of God's renewal; we face resource constraints and the tension of change, and time and again we experience God's leading in unity and sending.

We believe: **Church repotting is not just a strategy, but God's calling to His church in this generation.**

May the Lord raise up more sites and coworkers across Australia willing to respond to this calling, so that those places that seem weary may once again sprout, grow, and bear fruit because of the Gospel.

*"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."* (Isaiah 11:1)

**Rev. Canon Ben Wong is senior minister at TIMA.**



TIMA Pentecostal Sunday Combined service in 2025



# The Story Of The Bridge Church

PAUL DALE

“I will build my church” says the Lord Jesus, and in His extraordinary kindness that’s exactly what He has been doing through The Bridge Church in Sydney.

It was in August 2004 that a group of 10 people gathered to pray and envision what a new church might look like. We never imagined that 21 years later we’d be a church with 4 different campuses (Kirribilli, Neutral Bay, Macquarie Park and Rozelle), with 13 gatherings every Sunday and around 2000 people worshipping our Lord Jesus Christ.

There were 3 foundational truths that shaped the foundation of The Bridge Church, and these continue to be our ‘distinctives’. They are:

**1) Real Relationships:** “We are committed to being a church family that really does life together, with relationships marked by openness, authenticity, closeness, accountability, selflessness, genuine care and love (living out all the Biblical ‘one another’ verses)”  
So church is family, where you are known (by your pastors and by others) and where you know other people. Our desire is that church is a safe place to be real and vulnerable, without any masks; a diverse family with all ages and stages; and a family where your pastors not just know your name but know you as a unique person created in God’s image, and know what is happening in your life. As a family, we notice when people are not present, ensuring good follow up and pastoral care. When you know your people it shapes your preaching, particularly the application of God’s Word. It’s been extraordinary to see the impact this simple truth has had on the growth of our church. The simple act of remembering a name, making a phone call, turning up at the hospital, showing up in the crisis, offering practical & prayer support. This has also shaped our church planting strategy, so once a gathering reaches around 200 adults we’re looking to commission around 50 people to go and start a new congregation or new campus.

**2) Engaging Evangelism:** “We are committed to reaching the lost with the gospel of Jesus, in Kirribilli, Neutral Bay, Macquarie Park, Rozelle and beyond, through personal evangelism and community engagement. We are committed to equipping every member to share their personal testimony and be bold in personal evangelism.



Paul Dale

pictured

We have a genuine concern for the marginalised and the needy in our neighbourhood, seeking to love them through deed and declaration!”

As someone who had never stepped into a church until I was 21 years old, I’m very conscious of how weird church can be for the unbelievers. So whilst we pray for and expect people who do not yet know Jesus to be in our gatherings (so they can declare ‘surely God is in this place’), we are also realistic that the vast majority of people in our city do not wake up on a Sunday morning and think ‘I might go to church’. The main way those people are going to hear the good news about Jesus is through us, the people of God, not just shovelling a gospel tract down their throat, but living normal lives that shine Jesus and speak Jesus. As we gather Sunday by Sunday we want people to fall more in love with Jesus, get more excited about Jesus, ready to walk into their normal week on fire for Jesus and ready to be give an answer for the hope they have. Of course we run Alpha Courses and Christianity Explored Courses, and of course we hold particularly easy invitation events like Carols under the Bridge (with the backdrop of the Sydney Opera House & Harbour Bridge!), but the more our people are passionate about their faith, the more they have prayed for friends and shared the gospel with friends. We ask all our members to pray for ‘their 5’ – that is 5 people in their lives whom they love dearly who do not yet know Jesus, and to pray for them daily that they might know Jesus. It’s been extraordinary to see how many people have come to a saving faith through Jesus each year. We mark these incredible stories through full immersion baptisms in the harbour, hearing powerful testimonies and profound promises. Evangelism really is contagious, as we are boldly sharing the love of God shown in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Our concern for the marginalised and the needy also leads us to practice ‘merciful justice’, where we seek not only to



share the gospel but meet the real needs of the people around us. The needs can be overwhelming, so we encourage our members to focus on one area of their passion (prisoners, foster care, homelessness, disabilities, addiction ministries), seeking to love those whom Jesus called ‘the least of these’.

We have committed to formal ministries into the social housing in Kirribilli and Macquarie Park, believing in the long slow work of prayer, relationship and gospel proclamation, and we’ve seen a powerful work of the Spirit in those communities. We are also passionate about those in ‘Aged Care’ (perhaps the most neglected people in today’s society), sending teams in to run Communion Services. It’s amazing how even those suffering dementia come alive with the older hymns and prayers. We do believe many have rekindled their faith or come to faith through this ministry.

We also have a deep passion for Global Partners, now supporting 28 missionaries across the globe, but always seeking to have real relationship with them, so allocating 2 partners per gathering.

**3) Joyful Gatherings:** “We are committed to Spirit-filled gatherings, soaked in prayer, shaped by God’s word, with excellent preaching & worship, which engages both head & heart, with opportunities to teach, admonish & encourage one another, both formally & informally. At the Bridge Church we gather for

- Encountering God, through His word and by His Spirit
- Encouraging one another (Heb 10:25) in our faith
- Edification (Eph 4:12-13; Cor 14), with opportunities to use our gifts for the building up of the body (in an orderly and intelligible way)
- Equipping the saints for works of service (Eph 4:11-13; 1 Cor 12-14)
- Empowering the saints for gospel proclamation (1 Peter 3) & for holy living (Heb 10:23)

Our Sunday gatherings really are the highlight of our week, with people coming with an expectancy that God will be present by His Holy Spirit in a powerful way, doing the transformative work that only he can do amongst us.

The Bridge Church has been on a journey over the years, seeking to define more clearly who we are from a theological cultural perspective, because shapes our gatherings significantly. We are very comfortable to describe ourselves as Evangelical, Reformed, Charismatic, Anglicans – in that order! It has been powerful to see Word and Spirit filled gatherings, with many people from both more conservative and more Pentecostal backgrounds finding a safe place at our church. Our preaching is expository, with a focus on both exegesis and

application, with emotional intelligence (but not emotionalism). Our worship is charismatic, with a freedom of expression without manipulation or coercion. The ‘Open Mic’ moment in our gatherings is a place for a word of encouragement, a Scripture, testimony, answered prayer, or a word of prophecy, and the ‘mic’ is genuinely open for anyone to come forward (all weighed against Scripture).

Prayer has been the engine room of our church since our very first gathering. We soak all our church in prayer, with many meeting for pre-service prayer, as well as a team of Spirit-filled pray-ers offering prayer ministry every Sunday after every gathering. The Central Prayer gathering once a month has been the highlight, as literally 100s gather to worship, intercede, petition and thank our good heavenly Father who gives good gifts to his children and really can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. Hearing answered prayers each month, and offering individual prayer ministry and healing ministry has been so profoundly culture shaping for our church.

We also desire a posture of gratitude and thankfulness, so it’s important to have regular opportunities to share stories of God’s grace and thank God for his goodness to us.

Over the years we’ve added our final two distinctives, namely;

#### **4) Deep Discipleship and Training:**

“We are committed to equipping every member of the Bridge Church to grow actively in their discipleship to Jesus:

**Individually:** each member grows from abiding in a deep relationship with God.

**Communally:** each member grows relationally within a Discipleship Community

**Deliberately:** each member grows deliberately at their stage and season.

Our marriage courses, pre-marriage course, divorce care, and parenting courses have seen not only church members but local community members be equipped for that season of life.

One the more recent developments in the Bridge Church is the establishment of The School of Ministry. Our vision is to see the next generation of holy and humble pastors raised up for the Kingdom of God. So we’ve gathered Gap Year Students, Interns and Pastors-in-Training to receive formal and informal training and mentoring, as they discern God’s calling to ministry and are equipped for all the complexities of ministry. Identifying and recruiting the pastors for The Bridge Church has been one of the most tricky things over the



past few years, since we not only seek Spirit-filled pastors who are aligned with our theological culture, but also emotionally intelligent pastors and preachers who love people! This limiter is beginning to be addressed as we develop this training pipeline through the School of Ministry. It's been so exciting to see so many of our current pastors having come through the School of Ministry.

### 5) Radical God-centred Generosity:

“We are committed to developing a culture of people using their time, talents and money to serve eagerly and sacrificially - enabling the saints to discern their gifts, equipping the saints to improve their gifts and empowering the saints to use their gifts, striving for excellence for God's glory. Our faith in Jesus overflows in generous acts of service, so we are known in our community as a church that is eager to do good.”

The Bridge Church has often been described as a hospital for hurting Christians, and that continues to be the case. It is deeply sad to hear stories of hurt and pain at the hands of pastors, church members, and other Christians, and for some reason many of those hurting find themselves ‘dipping their toe back into church’ with us, sitting quietly wanting to be anonymous, and gradually healing and trusting a church again. It's been incredible to witness God's healing hand on so many people – some of whom remain at Bridge Church, but many others move to other churches as restored children of God eager and ready to trust & serve again.

The story of the Bridge Church has been so humbling, as God has continued to open new doors for the gospel in Sydney and beyond. As other local churches invited us to partner the gospel work, the power of churches working together (rather than competing), sharing resources and combining ministries has been so good for the gospel growth. We have journeyed through 2 amalgamations and 1 partnership with a university college. There has been, of course, pain points and moments of significant hurts, because we are people who love God's church and change is sometimes very difficult. But it's been so powerful to see how God brings unity where there was disunity, healing where there was hurt, and a togetherness in the gospel that the local communities can't ignore. I do believe that the humble servant-hearted convictions of godly believers who were persuaded of the power of partnership has been a significant factor in the growth of this church. This has meant that we have been able to replicate and multiply many ministries in many different locations, without having to reinvent the wheel. Whilst all our campuses have the same Bridge Church culture and content, we work hard to contextualise for the unique demographic and

ethnic context of each campus. For example, we now offer Alpha in multiple languages, such as Mandarin, Japanese, Farsi, and Thai. As we launch new youth or young adult ministries, new Playtimes or Everyday English, to have that wealth of resources from the ‘central’ team cannot be underplayed.

As church has grown we have fought hard to retain our small church feel, so our members feel part of a family with their own designated pastoral team. We often say we have ‘all the benefits of small church, with all the opportunities of large church’. This has been such a significant part of our culture and I do believe God has used that to grow his church.

So what is next? The honest answer is ‘we do not know, but the Lord knows’.

I didn't expect to still be at The Bridge Church after 21 years, but I'm so thankful the Lord has kept me here. We are looking forward to seeing more lost people being found, more saved sinners being transformed by Word and Spirit, and God's church being a light in the darkness here in Sydney.

Our next strategic vision is to launch ‘The Bridge Network’, an initiative to resource, train, equip & support churches in need, independent of The Bridge Church, across parts of Sydney & beyond - potentially impacting dozens of churches. We aim to do these providing funding for pastors in other churches (or new churches), sharing all our resources (kids, youth, worship, mission, discipleship etc.), sending people, and offering mentoring or just friendship to other pastors and churches to encourage them in their ministries (with no expectation or obligation of anything in return). We have been blessed with so much at The Bridge Church and so we just desire to be a blessing to others, to share what God has done and given us as a church to enrich others in Sydney and throughout the world.

As I often say at church *‘Not to us O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory’* (Psalm 115:1)

**Paul Dale is Senior Pastor at The Bridge Church.**



## An Audacious Adventure

PAUL ARNOTT

Direct from author: [parnott@me.com](mailto:parnott@me.com), \$35 plus postage.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD TRIST

As you look at your bookshelves at home, or in your kindle or iPad libraries, do you see any Christian books written by Australian authors, or published by Australian publishers? Anything by John Dickson, Leon Morris, John Chapman or Robert Banks? Anything published by Matthias Press, Acorn Press, Albatross Books, National Church Life Survey? Anything purchased from an Australian bookshop such as Koorong, Word, Open Books, or the sadly missed Ridley College Bookshop?

Paul Arnott's latest book, *An Audacious Adventure: Independent Australian Christian Publishing*, narrates the story of Australian Christian publishing over the past 50 years. It honours those in the past who stepped out in faith (often on a shoestring budget!) to promote Australian authors. It also points forward to the next generation of writers and bloggers and podcasters who will help shape the Australian church into the future.

Arnott begins the book with the story of *On Being* magazine, published in Melbourne by Baptist pastor Kevin Smith in the 1970s. This non-denominational evangelical publication was very influential in its time, with an estimated readership of over 35,000 people. I remember as a young, isolated schoolteacher living in country NSW, eagerly awaiting its delivery each month. It was a heady mix of news items, articles and stories, and sought to bridge the gap between biblical conservatism and social radical activism. Arnott suggests that although at times accused of being anti-church, it had the welfare of the church at its heart and, unlike social media today, was a forum where contentious issues could be safely discussed. Financial constraints caused its closure in the early 2000's.

The next chapter, "Five determined Anglicans", is the story of Acorn Press, and a famous meeting in 1979 where John Wilson, Kevin Engel, Alan Nichols, David Williams, and Janet Wyatt, each laid down a \$100 note, to commence the new enterprise. They saw the need for Australian Christian writers to be published locally rather than having to seek an overseas publisher. From that modest beginning Acorn Press went on to produce bestselling books such as Bishop Ray Smith's *People Caring for People*, Charles Sherlock's *Pastoral Handbook for Anglicans*, and the popular songbook *Praise for All Seasons*.



The stories of Albatross Books, ANZEA Publishing and Scripture Union are covered in the next chapter. Arnott deftly explores the perils and pitfalls of independent publishing, and how decisions to partner with bigger overseas publishers (in the case of Albatross with Lion Publishing from the UK) had some devastating consequences. I found his interviews with many of the Albatross authors inspiring, especially their processes of turning ideas for a book into reality. An encouragement for all of us who aspire to write.

Probably my favourite chapter was the one describing the genesis of Matthias Media, which continues to be such an important resource for evangelicals today. I was astonished to read that its well-known evangelistic tract *Two Ways to Live* has sold 4.1 million copies worldwide and has been translated into Chinese, Spanish, Japanese and French. Arnott suggests that the key to the success of Matthias Media has been its prioritisation of conservative theology and its resistance to commercialisation. It has been strategic in avoiding an over-reliance on generating sales only through Christian bookshops, instead building direct links to customers through conferences and focussed marketing. It is an amazing story!

Much more is covered in *An Audacious Adventure* including a discussion on the importance of Australian Christian newspapers and journals including *New Life*, *Zadok Perspectives*, and *Eternity*. and the decline of quality Christian print literature in a shifting media landscape. He also describes the downside to the rapid loss of Christian bookshops across the country with only one dominant player remaining, Koorong Books.

Paul Arnott is to be congratulated for undertaking this task of recording the rise and fall of Christian publishing in Australia, and for exploring what this might mean for the future. The book is a worthwhile read and will appeal to anyone with an interest in writing, publishing, and engaging Australians with the gospel.

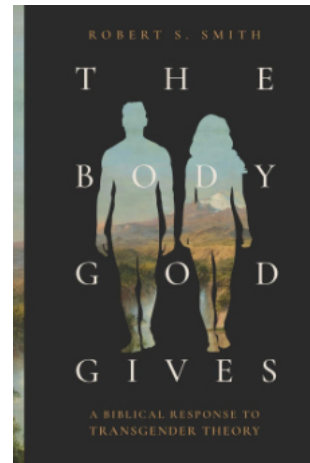
**Richard Trist is Chaplain to the Anglican Institute Ridley College.**

# The Body God Gives: A Biblical Response to Transgender Theory

ROBERT S. SMITH

publisher

REVIEWED BY TIM COLLISON



Debates about ontology should be nothing new to Anglicans. Fifteen (depending on how you count them) of the Articles of Religion deal with the nature of what a person or an element is. The Articles' concerns about how we see God, humanity, and what the sacraments are (or are not) demonstrate that trying to understand the nature of what things are is central to our understood identity.

We should then be equipped one, would think, to be able to participate in discussions about transgender issues. I suspect the reality is that most of us struggle with this. Either because we are concerned what people will think about what we might say, or we are unsure what we ourselves might think about it. It may even seem like it is not an issue we need to wrestle with. I doubt that there are many people in our congregations who are transitioning. Yet most of us will have either need to provide pastoral care to enquirers about faith who are transitioning or answer the questions our congregations might have about this issue.

As good evangelical Anglicans our thoughts would hopefully turn then to how God's word might illuminate this. This is where Robert S Smith's *The Body God Gives: A Biblical Response to Transgender Theory* is helpful. It speaks to the ontological issues transgender theory raises; and does so by systematically going through the Bible. At the same time Smith identifies key thinkers in this area; both those who argue for full affirmation of transitioning, and those who do not. He engages both Christian and secular authors on this topic as well.

The Biblical focus, and the engagement with multiple different thinkers on this topic, ensure that this book is a helpful starting point for anyone wishing to engage with this topic from an evangelical perspective. Smith is clear that this is the intent of the book. He is also clear that this is not a pastoral handbook on how to treat those who are wrestling with their identity. Or about the lived experience of those who are transgender.

I found the whole book useful; as a 'primer' in learning about the issue, and where to explore further, and in the

way he examines the whole Bible and as well as Christian and secular thinkers on this topic. The most compelling section to me was Smith's argumentation against a mismatch between body and soul, because of the fall. I am still thinking through all his conclusions, but it is certainly stimulating, and the Biblical Anthropology in the section is pertinent to issues beyond transgender theory.

**Tim Collison is Vicar at St Marks Camberwell and Secretary of EFAC Australia.**



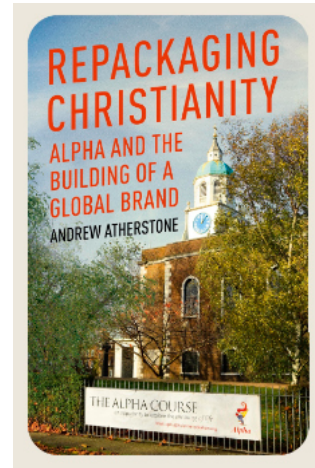


## Repackaging Christianity: Alpha and the Building of a Global Brand.

ANDREW ATHERSTONE

Hodder & Stoughton, 2023

REVIEWED BY PETER MACPHERSON



This is an easily readable account of Alpha’s origins and development over the past thirty years. The title might suggest it is a polemic but in essence it is a history. Andrew Atherstone, after all, is a serious ecclesiastical historian. He is Professor of Modern Anglicanism, Tutor in History and Doctrine at Oxford University and Latimer Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall. He lists his major research interests as “Anglicanism and Evangelicalism between the 18th and 21st centuries.” Although this is not a long book it concludes with 53 pages of endnotes, detailing Atherstone’s reliance on archives, diaries, interviews and parish magazines.

Alpha began in the late 1970s as an in-house discipleship course at an Anglican church in London called Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB). It was described as “a course on Christian foundations ... designed to help those who want to go on in the Christian life” and had six sessions. The curate, Charles Marnham, ran the course in his flat above the church hall and food was provided because those attending were often coming straight from work.

The development of Alpha over the next 15 years was tied up with the renewal of HTB as a church under the leadership of three vicars: Raymond Turvey, John Collins and Sandy Millar. Evangelism and renewal became part of the culture of the church. Collins, for example, had been a curate under John Stott, had led David Shepherd (later Bishop of Liverpool) and David Watson to faith, and also eagerly embraced the renewal of the 1960s & 1970s. It was David Watson who recommended John Wimber to Collins in 1982. Wimber became (in Atherstone’s description) the “Californian catalyst” to HTB’s growth and had a profound spiritual impact on the church, especially on then curate, Nicky Gumbel.

Gumbel took over running Alpha in 1990 and changed it from a discipleship course to an evangelistic course. 1993 marked the publication of Gumbel’s basic text *Questions of Life* and the launch of Alpha internationally. The first conference attracted over a thousand delegates from the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Singapore, NZ and the USA. Over the next thirty years Alpha grew into what Atherstone describes as “a global phenomenon.” He

details the annual attendance figures (over a million each year since 2003), the amount of money generated, the sales figures for Gumbel’s books, and the move from recorded talks to the film series.

A key reason to read this book is to discover why Alpha has become the “global brand” that it has. Atherstone doesn’t provide any extended analysis of this but reasons emerge as he tells the story. Alpha would not have developed without Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel’s leadership, determination and giftedness. Over decades at HTB the Eton and Cambridge-educated pair combined to break the mould of what a local Anglican church might achieve. In the mid 90s they started to feel impelled by God to share Alpha with the world. In just two years 9,000 church leaders attended Alpha conferences and 1,500 courses were registered (p.57). The content of the course was re-worked a number of times by Gumbel and he wrote most of the books. This was accompanied by professional marketing which was used to promote national and international Alpha campaigns. Celebrity Christians from the worlds of sport, entertainment and politics added lustre and credibility. Despite all this, both Millar and Gumbel placed the emphasis on prayer. In 2001 there were over 18,000 people involved in 600 Alpha prayer meetings. Two years later there were also Alpha prayer meetings at Anglican cathedrals in Coventry, London, Manchester, Oxford, St Albans and York. Before the 2004 campaign a giant prayer meeting was held on Clapham Common with 4,000 people attending. Prayer remained a constant characteristic of Alpha.

Another, more controversial, reason for Alpha’s growth has been the focus on the Holy Spirit. Miller, Gumbel and HTB generally have been influenced positively over the years by the charismatic renewal, the Toronto blessing and the ministries of David Watson and John Wimber. The weekend away with its focus on the Holy Spirit had profound impact on many attendees. Healing, tongues and lively worship became part of the HTB/Alpha culture. Atherstone notes, however, that Gumbel has more recently balanced a theology of blessing with a

theology of suffering, shaped by experiences of illness and death in his own pastoral ministry.

The final three chapters look at Alpha's growth among Roman Catholics, its support of social justice and its involvement in global mission. Throughout these chapters we see how Alpha has adapted and matured from "supper party evangelism in the Kensington suburbs into a global brand of Christian outreach, contextualised into multiple cultures and languages across the planet" (p.240). It is used in multiple denominations and all types of churches; it is used in prisons, schools and boardrooms; it began as cassettes and videos and is now available free online. Latest figures record that Alpha is available in over 150 countries and has been translated into over 100 languages.

Nicky Gumbel's "studied silence" on homosexuality (p.181) has been problematic. Atherstone details how the initial conservative chapter on homosexuality in Gumbel's *Searching Issues* was modified over time and finally deleted

altogether. This is all part of Apha's attempt to avoid controversy so that the gospel can be heard by as many people as possible. Perhaps HTB's recent membership of the Church of England Alliance network will reassure some critics.

Like it or loathe it, Alpha continues to help many people come to faith in Jesus Christ. It has had its critics and although Atherstone is not shy in quoting many of them (eg "join-the-dots Christianity," "theological vacuity," "a toothless and sentimental gospel") this is a generally positive telling of the story. If you love Alpha this history will inspire you. If you loathe it, you still might be inspired, inspired to develop your own evangelistic course. Anyone committed to evangelism, mission and church growth will benefit from reading this generous account.

**Rev Canon Peter MacPherson is Canon of Preaching & Teaching, St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne.**



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