

Deconstruct/Reconstruct: Tools for Generous Orthodoxy

Version 3

Alister Pate 25/1/2017

The purpose of this course is to provide people with some resources to help them on their journey of deconstruction and reconstruction. The spiritual journey is a multi-dimensional one, and the aim here is to speak to people intellectually, to give them the experience of being part of a community, and some spiritual tools.

This is not an attempt to provide an orthodoxy which people need to sign up to. Instead, it is an attempt to open up the conversation, to give people a bit of a taste of the riches of the Christian tradition – two thousand years of people discussing what to make of Jesus Christ – his life, death, and resurrection. It is an invitation engage with the deepest and richest intellectual and spiritual tradition that Western culture has to offer.

Having said that, everyone has a position, and it is much easier to engage with an articulated set of proposals and practices. So this is where I have gotten to with my journey to date. I'm still learning, and my intent from this for us to all learn together. Everyone has something to share – there is no ultimate expert on matters of the soul.

How the Course Will Run

Firstly, the ideas. Loads of these. Expect to be stretched. But in a good way.

Secondly we aim to be community. In good community all sorts of things suddenly become possible. Church should be (though often isn't) very good community indeed. The aim is that we will model the sort of community we would like to see in the world. Some conversations might be a little raw – we want to be the sort of safe space where we can talk about what's real for us, as well as flying the occasional theological kite.

Thirdly, as well as talking about stuff, we are going to experiment with some spiritual practices outside class. These will probably be drawn mainly from the Ignatian world (especially the *Examen*), so that we have some actual data to work with, and some shared experiences to discuss.

Practicalities

The proposal is to have six two hour sessions, each of which will consist of one taught hour, and one hour of discussion (probably over pizza and a glass of wine.) I'll include suggested reading lists for further exploration.

Session 1: The Spiritual Journey

It used to be so easy. You got up at the crack of dawn to have your enriching quiet time. At church, which you regularly attended (probably more than once a week) the singing moved you, the message was pitched right to your condition. The Lord was with you, and you were friends with God, and everything made sense – you were an on-fire for the Lord Jesus freak and it was sweet. At least, it was sweet while it lasted. Now you sit at the back of the church and you look around at everyone else and feel so disconnected that you aren't sure whether to cry or start arguing with people. The

message is banal at best, and the singing feels forced and manipulative. People are starting to notice – offering to pray for you, asking you anxiously about your faith, recommending books that helped their cousin that one time. “What’s going on?” you ask yourself. “Am I losing my faith?”

Here’s the thing: As Sister Maryanne Confoy once said to me: “your restlessness is what is right with you.” What is going on is at one and the same time a risky spirit quest, and also a very normal part of your faith development journey.

There are a couple of different systems we could talk about, but they gather under the name “stages of faith.” There seem to be two different, but interlocking, movements going on. For the first, we are going to follow Brian McLaren’s four stage theory. For McLaren the best metaphor is seasonal. Spring (Awareness), summer (Complexity), autumn (Perplexity) and winter (Harmony) come in due season. None of these stages is any better (or worse) than any other (though some are a lot more pleasant to experience than others.)

The second movement is something less cyclical, and goes by a number of different names – Janet Hagberg calls it “the wall,” Richard Rohr describes it as “the second half of life,” and it even pops up in secular leadership thinking in Heifetz’s distinction between technical and adaptive problems.

The aim of this course is to help you to continue your journey – and part of that is by naming what you are going through.

Session 2: Why Conservatives and Liberals are Both Wrong

Got your attention didn’t it? Because the question doesn’t seem to make sense. Surely Conservatives and Liberals are the only two options available. They are mutually exclusive, and exhaustive – aren’t they?

Actually, not so much.

We are living through a time of change in all sorts of areas. One of the big things that is happening is that we are living in the end of Modernity, and moving into a completely new era. (Probably. It’s hard to predict the future. But that’s what seems to be happening.) Consider Star Trek. In the original series, the ideal was Spock. Scientific, entirely rational. But the recent films are strangely interested in Spock’s emotional life. The human ideal has changed from something “rational” to something “emotional.”

Both Conservatism and Liberalism are theological responses to Modernity. But what if Modernity is not in fact the only philosophical position available – or even a particularly good one? What then?

The important point here is that Christianity is not a set of timeless truths analogous to those of science. Rather, it is a particular story, rooted in particular events and communities. This is a difficult perspective for Modernists, who think that truth should be, in principle, available to all without limitations of time and space – to an ideal observer. However, it turns out that there is (in Nagel’s term) no “view from nowhere.”

This session might require your thinking hats. We will draw on thinkers including Michael Polanyi and Lesslie Newbigin to help us to grasp a way of thinking about our faith allows us to believe it to be true while simultaneously living in the pluralist society of 21st Century Australia.

Session 3: Christian Community

You sit in the back row these days. All around you, people are responding to what's going on. Lifting up their hands in praise, earnestly taking notes during the sermon, moved to tears by the altar call, opening their wallets when the offering comes around. But not you. Not anymore. You used to be like that too, but things don't seem to be working any more. The music, the preaching, the praying... it all seems somehow fake, somehow to be missing the point. And you know you can't really talk openly about it – the pressure to get with the programme is so strong. So you've been kind of drifting away, resigned to something that seemed so important seeming less and less central.

Church should not be like that. It should be a place of authentic relating, openness to questioning, and hospitable to all, no matter where they currently find themselves on their faith journey.

But what actually is church? Does it matter? Wouldn't it be easier to just be a Christian by myself, or with a couple of friends? What is the point of gathering together?

We will address this question using Newbigin's thinking on what church is for – to be a collaborator with God in God's mission: God's mission has a church. We will explore the fundamentally corporate nature of Christian belief, both from the perspective of sociology (Berger's plausibility structures) and also Biblically.

The way salvation has been taught in Evangelical churches has an unfortunate tendency to leave one thinking that it's a private matter, that salvation is something you carry around with yourself as a sort of get-out-of-gaol-free card. That, once the salvific message has been preached and heard, church has done its work.

But what if that's not true – if salvation is much more a matter of being grafted onto something? And that something is the church, in all its weirdness and flawed humanity.

Evangelical Christianity seems to be dependent on a very Modern set of assumptions – that faith is purely a set of truth-claims one assents to. Hence the importance of long, exegetical sermons and multi-page statements of belief. But once we realize that belief is more than just truth claims – *fides* as well as *assensus* in the language of the early reformer Melancthon – what does that mean for church?

The uniquely Christian idea is the Trinity. God is in Godself inherently communal – what does that mean for what it means to be human, and what it means to be a Christian?

The key thing the Christian church has done in this sphere is the sacraments. So let's talk about what they are (Communion and Baptism), and how they relate to this whole sphere of questions. Can it be that the best way forward might involve digging deep into our past?

Session 4: So How Should I Read the Bible Then?

It depends a little where you're from, church-wise. But you have probably heard a *lot* of Bible in your life. Long exegetical sermons featuring the phrase "in the original Greek", little titbits trotted out to illustrate a point someone was making. Proof texts – a million of them, ripped out of context and deployed like a weapon – "ah yes, but what does the Bible say? Let's just check shall we? Oh look, it turns out that I'm right, hurrah."

But let's step back a little bit. What actually is the Bible? The contention of this session is that the way we use the Bible (both Conservatives and Liberals, frankly) is highly dependent on Modernism. Brian McLaren argues that in the Evangelical church the Bible is seen as something like the constitution. Do you have a quandary? Just look up the problem in the index, and read off the solution.

But in fact the Bible is a much more complex and interesting book than either side give it credit for. We've got like one hour for this, so we'll probably make one point, which is this: The Bible points me to Jesus, and Jesus is the interpretive frame through which all of Scripture should be read.

Session 5: So Who Is This God Person Anyway?

God can be presented in so many different ways. From the "senile benevolence" who mainly cares that "all the young people are having a good time" to the terrifying figure whose home was the Ark of the Covenant who it was death to see, to the object of vague aspirational language. What really can be said of such a controversial figure, who declines to make himself accessible to objective, rational measurement? Yet people seem to make such self-confident claims about God – God's existence or otherwise, God's desires for the world in general – and surprisingly detailed instructions about dating and even shopping, all from the creator of the universe.

The Christian claim is that God is the one who raised Jesus Christ from the dead – and thus is the one who is revealed by Jesus. To put it another way, if Jesus Christ is God's self-revelation – what God has to say about Godself. This helps us to answer the question of what God's fundamental quality is. For much of Christianity's history, God has been defined as fundamentally about power. However, if we start from Jesus, a different image presents itself. While power is not absent from Jesus' life, his fundamentally defining quality appears to be love.

What would it mean for us if we really believed that God was fundamentally love, rather than power? What would it mean for the intractable question of suffering? What would it mean for a belief in a God who is both transcendent and immanent? What does it mean to believe specifically in the Trinitarian God? Is the invitation in fact to be drawn up into the dance of the three–personed God?

Session 6: Drawing It All Together

"I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on the near side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity" Oliver Wendell Holmes

Finally, drawing it all together. The purpose of this course has been to think about how to go about having faith in our current post-Christendom, increasingly post-Christian, culture. So this week will largely deal with the questions and issues that have arisen during the course of the previous five weeks. Fundamentally, the question tonight is this: how do we live as Christians in the world?