The New Heretics: Popular Theology, Progressive Christianity and Protestant Language Ideologies

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department for the Study of Religion
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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the development of progressive Christianity. It explores the ways in which progressive Christian churches in Canada adopt biblical criticism and popular theology. Contributing to the anthropology of Christianity, this study is primarily an ethnographic and linguistic analysis that juxtaposes contemporary conflicts over notions of the Christian self into the intersecting contexts of public discourse, contending notions of the secular and congregational dynamics. Methodologically, it is based upon two-and-a-half years of in-depth participant observation research at five churches and distinguishes itself as the first scholarly study of progressive Christianity in North America.

I begin this study by outlining the historical context of skepticism in Canadian Protestantism and arguing that skepticism and doubt serve as profoundly religious experiences, which provide a fuller framework than secularization in understanding the experiences of Canadian Protestants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In doing so, I draw parallels between the ways that historical and contemporary North American Christians negotiate the tensions between their faith and biblical criticism, scientific empiricism and
liberal morality. Chapter Two seeks to describe the religious, cultural and socio-economic worlds inhabited by the progressive Christians featured in this study. It focuses on the worldviews that emerge out of participation in what are primarily white, middle-class, liberal communities and considers how these identity-markers affect the development and lived experiences of progressive Christians.

My next three chapters explore the ways that certain engagements with text and the performance or ritualization of language enable the development of a distinctly progressive Christian modality. Chapter Three investigates progressive Christian textual ideologies and argues that the form of biblical criticism that they employ, along with entrenched concerns about the origins of the Christian faith ultimately, leads to a rejection of the biblical narrative. Chapter Four examines the ways in which progressive Christians understand individual 'deconversion' narratives as contributing to a shared experience or way of being Christian that purposefully departs from evangelical Christianity. The final chapter analyses rhetoric of the future and argues that progressive Christians employ eschatological language that directs progressive Christians towards an ultimate dissolution.
Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking the five congregations that are featured in this dissertation. I truly enjoyed the time I spent with each community and thank my friends at each location for their warmth and generosity. They deserve much more than acknowledgements because in many ways they are co-writers of this dissertation. I want to thank each of my interlocutors for challenging me to think outside the box about religion, theology and anthropology and to never take anything at face value. A special word of thanks and admiration to Karen, Dawn, Gretta, Elizabeth, 'Stan' and 'Mary-Ellen' for their wisdom, compassion and hospitality. I found myself truly inspired by their work, and along with proficiency in progressive Christianity, I have gained from them insight into what makes a good teacher, leader and friend.

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This is a dissertation that, in part, explores the ways that religious agents make sense of origins. I am fortunate to be able to trace my own academic genealogy to Michele Murray, Harvey White and Bruce Gilbert at Bishop's University. From them, I gained a strong foundation in the academic study of religion and their guidance allowed me to begin to imagine a project that would examine historical Jesus studies in contemporary society. I am so very grateful for their continued encouragement and friendship long after I was their student. I hope that in some way my accomplishments with this dissertation make my alma mater proud.

It was Bill James, my MA supervisor at Queen's University, who first sent me on a field trip to George Street United Church in Peterborough to hear John Spong speak and later to West Hill United Church in Scarborough to interview Gretta Vosper about progressive Christianity. A whole new world of ethnographic research was opened up for me under Professor James' direction. As another scholar of religion recently pointed out that Professor James' work aids his audience in cultivating an appreciation of the aesthetics of religion. I can think of no greater compliment and can verify that as one of Professor James' students I developed keen observational skills and an attention to language and literature that continues to shape my writing.
Despite the emphasis that this project places on language and word choice, I am not sure that I will have the words to express how grateful I am to my dissertation committee. Pamela Klassen has been an exemplary supervisor and mentor in every way imaginable. Pushing me when I needed to be pushed and letting me sit back and muddle through ideas when I needed to let creative juices stew. Every time I arrived at her office with a new idea for the direction of this dissertation, I was amazed at Professor Klassen's extensive familiarity with the subject matter. She is a dynamic scholar and I have been so privileged to be the recipient of her guidance and her friendship. Since his arrival at the University of Toronto mid-way through my writing process, Simon Coleman has nurtured my development as an anthropologist and a scholar. His constructive criticism has kept me grounded in the writing process and profoundly shaped my interests in language ideologies and the anthropology of Christianity. Phyllis Airhart's enthusiasm for Canadian history is contagious, and I am so grateful to her for inspiring me to bring to life the historical figures featured in this dissertation so that they might serve as conversation partners with my ethnographic work. Additionally, I want to thank Professor Airhart for her close reading of the entire dissertation and for catching both grammatical and scholarly inconsistencies. Joe Bryant has been a dedicated supporter of this project from the very beginning. His ability to challenge his students to think in different ways and to clearly articulate the significance of their work has been a great benefit to my development as a scholar. I am so grateful for both his personal and professional support. Finally, it was an honour to have Kevin O'Neill and Matthew Engelke serve as external examiners of this dissertation as their work has deeply influenced how I think about cultural anthropology and the study of contemporary
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One of the joys of studying at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto is that my friends and graduate student colleagues are too numerous to list. Know that I am so grateful to each of you for the intellectual stimulation that you have provided and for the deep friendships we developed. I do want to offer a special word of thanks to Jenn Cianca who has walked every step of the dissertation with me—sometimes
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understanding of the role that history and narrative play in developing religious identities. Above all that, I am grateful for his love, his support and his humour. I can't imagine having completed this project without him.

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Epigram

Time present and time past
are both perhaps present in time future,
and time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
all time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
remaining a perpetual possibility
only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
down the passage which we did not take
towards the door we never opened
into the rose-garden. My words echo
thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

- “Burnt Norton” T. S. Eliot
Introduction
Believers in Exile: Locating the Dislocated

The need of literary, academic, or café-society intellectuals to include religious feelings in the inventory of their sources of impressions and sensations, and among their topics for discussion, has never yet given rise to a new religion. Nor can a religious renascence be generated by the need of authors to compose books, or by the far more effective need of clever publishers to sell such books. No matter how much the appearance of a widespread religious interest may be simulated, no new religion has ever resulted from the needs of intellectuals or from their chatter. The whirligig of fashion will presently remove this subject of conversation and journalism, which fashion has made popular.

- Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1922)\(^1\)

Is it even possible Jesus, that we Christians are the villains who killed you?
Smothering you underneath literal Bibles,
Dated creeds,
Irrelevant doctrines,
And dying structures.

- John Shelby Spong, "The Lament of a Believer in Exile" (2007)\(^2\)

**Introduction**

Something is happening in church basements, local pubs and fellowship halls across North America. Groups of liberal or progressive Christians, agnostics and atheists are meeting to read and reflect upon the works of popular scholars. They are questioning traditional belief structures, the historical accuracy of biblical texts and are attempting to assemble an understanding of liturgy and prayer that is in line with their own empirical and secular-scientific experiences. These individuals and groups are representative of a growing movement of Christians who self-identify as "progressive," "post-Christian" or "believers in

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\(^1\) This is the concluding statement from Weber's chapter, "Intellectualism, Intellectuals, History of Religion" in *The Sociology of Religion* (1993: 137).

\(^2\) From the Prologue to *Jesus for the Non-Religious* by John Shelby Spong (2007: 1).
exile." In choosing these and other locutions, they self-consciously construct a socio-religious identity that represents and places them in the role of the 'heretic,' the 'deviant,' and the 'skeptic' within the realm of North American Christianity. The term "believer in exile," for example, is put forward by Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong in his best-selling work, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1998). In this work, Spong aligns the experience of modern Christians with the Judean exiles in Babylon in 586 BCE and subsequent exiles in the Jewish narrative, suggesting that he believes that liberal and progressive Christians have been forcibly dislocated from their Christian communities. He explains this association as follows: "I live in a state of exile from the presuppositions of my own religious past. I am exiled from the literal understandings that shaped the creed at its creation. I am exiled from the worldview in which the creed was formed" (1998: 20). Further investigation into Spong's writings makes it clear that in employing the biblical term exile, Spong holds the Church responsible for exiling those members who are incapable of accepting what he sees as antiquated doctrines and traditions.

Progressive Christianity constitutes a loosely organised group of liberal mainline Christians who meet regularly to debate and articulate a theology that upholds their

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3 Like the emerging evangelicals studied by James Bielo (2011a) many of the progressive Christians in this study were ambiguous about the labels applied to this movement. Like Bielo I do not expect that the term "progressive Christian" will necessarily have any significant longevity (2011a: 203). In fact towards the end of my fieldwork a few of my interlocutors at West Hill United Church began to employ the term "evolutionary Christianity" in reference to a podcast series that their minister Gretta Vosper had participated in as a speaker. In certain ways this term is more appropriate because it maintains many of the traits of progressive Christianity, in terms of representing the notion moving forward and changing with the times as well as reflecting the importance of scientific theories as opposed to biblical ones in setting their worldviews.

4 While I indicate that progressive Christianity has been self-consciously constructed, many of the Christians who participated in this study reported that they felt that the identity had been in certain ways forced upon them and that they had no other choice but to leave their original faith communities. This expulsion was never overt in the sense that individuals were asked to leave but rather through subtle 'bullying' (other members of their communities no longer invited them to social events or talked about them behind their backs). Other participants in my study indicated that while they felt exiled from certain faith communities the experience was one that was generated from within (once they adopted a new theological worldview they felt uncomfortable in church communities that held a more traditional one).
conceptions of intellectual integrity in light of modern science and contemporary liberal morality. In instances when the Christian narrative does not cohere to an established scientific or liberal worldview, those elements of the Christian story and related practices are rejected. These communities have been greatly influenced by the writings of the Jesus Seminar, the so-called New Atheists and the popular theologians and biblical scholars who build upon and contribute to these works. Ultimately their theology suggests that Christianity would be better off without some of its traditional core components, namely certain versions of the historical Jesus, the authority of scripture, sacrificial atonement theology and a relational deity.

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5 Science, in this instance is used to refer to both the natural sciences as well as more broadly to notions of rationality.

6 The Jesus Seminar, established by the Westar Institute stands as a well-known but controversial example of an historical Jesus study. The Jesus Seminar was initiated in 1985 by Robert W. Funk, who invited thirty scholars to gather in an attempt "to identify an agreed inventory of sayings and actions by Jesus that could serve as a database for Jesus studies" (Jenks 2000: 2). As Funk explains, the initial regulations they established were crucial to the overall scholarship of the Seminar. Unlike other scholarly institutions, the Seminar deemed that with each issue they "would come to a decision, no matter how provisional or tentative" (Funk 2000: 11; 1996: 8). The Seminar's commitment to decisiveness is important because it separates the Seminar's scholarship from that of other academics. At the end of each debate they were able to declare the consensus and draw a conclusion from the majority opinion—Jesus did this, Jesus said this, etc. Ultimately they presented their version of Jesus in two works: The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus (1993) and The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus (1998). The Jesus Seminar is discussed more in depth in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

7 The 'New Atheism', also known as 'Atheism 3.0', is marked by its scathing critique of all religious thinking and practices. Well-known figures in this field are Sam Harris, Daniel C. Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, who are collectively referred to as the Four Horsemen. Like the progressive Christian authors featured in this dissertation, the new atheists write for a popular audience and their works are likewise distinguished by their controversial and catchy titles—see, for example, Sam Harris' best-selling work The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason (2004); Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion (2006), which was on the New York Times bestseller list for fifty one weeks; Daniel C. Dennett's Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (2006) and Christopher Hitchens' God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything (2007).

8 One prominent example is the 'Living the Questions' video and DVD-series that features popular theologians and biblical scholars along with clergy and laity discussing the relevance of Christianity in the contemporary world. The series was created by Rev. Jeff Procter-Murphy and Rev. David Felten, both United Methodist clergy from Arizona. According to the 'Living the Questions' website, their curriculum is currently being used by nearly 5000 churches worldwide. More information is available online at: http://www.livingthequestions.com/xmlcarts/pages.php?pageid=4 (Accessed June 20, 2012).
Unlike evangelical Christianity, progressive Christians have not agreed on a specific theology or way of being Christian. Rather, they understand themselves as a religious community with a fluid theology. Thus, they reject the (traditionally) central tenets of Christian belief and define themselves according to what they are not (the evangelical Christian Right) and what they do not believe, rather than what they are and what they do believe (which is constantly changing). Specifically, progressive Christians advocate a theology asserting that Christianity will survive the twenty-first century only if it eliminates certain traditional core components. Instead of adopting a set of perceived normative beliefs and practices, progressive Christians purposefully position themselves as both deviants and defenders of their version of a legitimate Christianity. As such, progressive Christians remain committed to institutional Christianity but posture themselves as radical reformers or heretics.

To a certain extent, progressive Christians share some of the traits of the 'Cultural Christians' identified by Phil Zuckerman (2008) in his study of religious ambiguity in Denmark and Sweden. Zuckerman's exploration of Christianity in these two countries found that most Swedes and Danes self-identify as Christians but do not ascribe to many of the

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9 The term evangelical is, of course, hotly contested both within academic and popular circles. In his study of evangelical mega-churches, Omri Elisha (2011) notes that the term is often misunderstood because of the divergence between the groups that often claim the label (2011: 10). That being said, Elisha notes, following Christian Smith (1998) that regardless of perceived difficulties in interpreting the category, sociologically speaking, it remains an important identity marker and "is meaningful as a basis of subcultural identity for a large segment of American churchgoers" (Elisha 2011: 225; see also Smith 1998: 14). In recent years, evangelical and conservative Christians have clarified a standard set of beliefs and actions through which they establish a normative definition concerning what it means to be 'Christian' (see Elisha 2008: 56). For evangelicals and religious conservatives, belief in atonement through Jesus and the use of the term "born again" serve as a strong indication of one's status as an insider of Christianity and separates the "true believers" from those who attend what they call "dead" or "anaemic" churches (see Bebbington 1989; Miller 1997; Smith 1998). Often mainline churches are criticized for "the lack of feeling and passion in their services" (Shoaps 2002: 35). While the category 'evangelical' is fluid, scholars generally agree that they possess four features, identified by David Bebbington as the quadrilateral—conversionism, Bibliism, crucicentrism and activism (Bebbington 1989: 4-8). Sam Reimer reports that evangelicals often use these four features as a means of determining who is 'for them' and who is 'against them' (Reimer 2003: 153-54).
beliefs that one would normally associate with Christianity, such as belief in God or Jesus, belief in life after death, or the notion that the bible is the literal word of God. The majority of the participants in Zuckerman’s study celebrated major Christian rituals (baptism, confirmation, church weddings and funerals), and contributed financially to the church (through an optional 1 percent tax) but few attended church regularly. When pressed, those interviewed by Zuckerman reported that Christianity for them was a part of their collective heritage, "it is manifested in their childhood experiences and family traditions" (1998: 150). In many ways, this notion of being culturally Christian is reflected by the progressive Christians featured in this study. Repeatedly, when asked why they claim to be Christian, despite the fact that they do not believe many of the core tenets of the Christian tradition, the progressive Christians whom I studied explained that it was part of their culture and heritage, how they were raised and part of their ontology. For example, Pastor Dawn, the Lutheran minister at one of the churches featured in this study would often explain that certain beliefs, practices and narratives "are in our bones," indicating that they are part of their very constitution as humans.10

Zuckerman’s study of the ways that Christians in Denmark and Sweden represent their religiosity is a sociological one that refers more to larger religious trends within a national setting than to the study of one group. There are some striking differences between his use of the term 'cultural Christian' and mine. Most importantly, the assumptions made on

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10 Having grown up in a Jewish family and having conducted qualitative research in a Jewish community while in graduate school, Zuckerman draws an analogy between cultural Christianity and secular Judaism. Specifically, he points out that while his family participated in many of the Jewish holidays and sent him to Hebrew school and Jewish summer camp they did not believe any of the stories from the Hebrew bible actually happened nor did they worship God. Zuckerman explains that this is the case for many Jews in America and in Israel reporting that only six percent of American Jews and fourteen percent of Israeli Jews are "sincere believers in God and the literal word of the Torah" (1998: 151). Likewise, the progressive Christians I studied sometimes made comparisons between their movement and secular Judaism in order to explain that a precedent existed for one to be a part of a religious tradition without holding any of the beliefs associated with that tradition.
the part of Zuckerman's subjects of study is that to see one's self as 'culturally Christian' is the normative mode of religiosity. Instead, the progressive Christians in this study understand a traditional or evangelical variety of Christianity as normative and position themselves as diverting from the norm. Furthermore, unlike Zuckerman's research subjects, whom he reports are for the most part ambiguous about their religious identity and reluctant to speak about it, progressive Christians are passionate about their religious identity, beliefs (or lack thereof) and practices. Having positioned themselves in opposition to other varieties of Christianity they are eager to articulate and make meaningful their religiosity.

The use of the term "progressive Christian" can be misleading. The Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) was established in 1996 in the United States under the leadership of Jim Adams as an institution and a network that created a place for skeptics and agnostics within the church. In 1996, TCPC created a website where they posted their eight-point belief statement, which is available in its most recent form through their website (Appendix A). The 'Eight Points' was initially adopted by The Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity (CCPC) but was later rejected because it was perceived to be too Christo-centric. Instead, CCPC created their own Eight Points that espouse a similar social-justice orientation but without any reference to Jesus or God (Appendix A). This use of the term "progressive" should not be conflated with its use by the Evangelical Left, Third Wave

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11 When discussing 'traditional' and 'evangelical' Christianities, progressive Christians differentiate between styles and modes of belief. Under the heading 'traditional' they place Roman Catholic and mainline churches in doing so they are denoting both styles of worship and liturgical practices as well as presentation of doctrine as fact. For example, an Anglican church that presented the virgin birth or the resurrection as having really happened might be classified by a progressive Christian as a traditional church. According to this progressive Christian typology, evangelicals share belief practices with traditional churches but are classified as evangelical for many of the same reasons that scholars use to classify evangelicals (see previous footnote).

12 The Eight Points, TCPC: [http://www.tcpc.org/about/8points.cfm](http://www.tcpc.org/about/8points.cfm).

13 Our Eight Points, CCPC: [http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page_id=6](http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page_id=6).
Christianity and the Emergent Church, who, in certain instances, appear to share many of the political ideologies of the progressive Christians discussed in this dissertation. However, the Evangelical Left, Third Wave Christianity and the Emergent Church are distinct movements with quite different histories, approaches to biblical hermeneutics and views on the role of the church in the world (see Bielo 2011a; cf. Bialecki 2009a for a discussion of a Third Wave Church that represents itself as a theologically conservative and politically progressive Christian community). Additionally, the use of the term progressive should not be understood as indicating that progressive Christianity is a direct descendent of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century progressivism in Christianity, most clearly exemplified by the social gospel. While certainly the progressive Christians I study agree with the tenets of the social gospel and, as in the case of the United Church of Canada, see many of the proponents of the social gospel as their denominational forerunners, they are two distinct movements and a direct genealogical link should not be drawn. The progressive Christianity discussed in this study stems from very different intellectual, political and social factors. In my next chapter, I attempt to tease out some of the historical figures whose own stories mirror those of the progressive Christians featured in this study. In doing so, I do not intend to make the argument that they are intimately linked or that the works of these figures led to progressive Christianity, rather my intention is to examine the socio-historical atmosphere in which progressive Christianity in Canada locates itself.

Despite the apparent ambiguity of what exactly comprises progressive Christianity, Hal Taussig (2006) defines it as a movement focused upon inclusivity, liturgical re-visioning,

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14 Most importantly, progressive movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are for the most part Christo-centric in their theological orientations.
intellectual integrity and the incorporation of non-Christian rituals into their services.\textsuperscript{15} Those who adopt the term progressive Christian tend to be affiliated with—or are members of communities that are affiliated with—The Center for Progressive Christianity in the United States and the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity in Canada.\textsuperscript{16} Assuming "intellectual integrity" as their rallying cry, progressive Christians consider themselves to be what one of their leaders, Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, identifies as "believers in exile" or the "Church Alumni Association"—i.e., those who feel that it is impossible to participate in religious activities because of the absolutist, non-scientific, truth claims of the contemporary evangelical church.

Despite their declarations of the impossibility of participation in churches and the majority of their members being in a "state of exile," progressive Christians are in fact actively engaged in church activities. Echoing Spong's insistence that Christianity must "change or die"—with change being the preferential option in almost every case—they adopt

\textsuperscript{15} The term "intellectual integrity" is derived from the popular theology of John A. T. Robinson, a prominent Bishop in the Church of England, whose 1963 publication, \textit{Honest to God}, earned him the title "the atheist priest." \textit{Honest to God} calls for a "recasting of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms," including an insistence that "the most fundamental categories of our theology—of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself—must go into the melting" (1963: 9). Robinson's book consists mostly of a practical "recasting" of Christianity following the theology of Tillich (Ground of Being), Bonhoeffer (religionless Christianity) and Bultmann (demythologizing, which Robinson echoed by calling for a "dereligionisation") (cf. Taussig 2006: 25-34). In Chapter Five of this dissertation I compare progressive Christian notions of intellectual integrity to the Protestant promotion of sincerity outlined by Webb Keane (2002).

\textsuperscript{16} In the United States there are several other prominent progressive Christian organizations with new ones forming regularly. In fact, it is difficult to keep track of all of them. In the United Kingdom, the term "Post Christian" is more prevalent than progressive Christian. Members of this movement are often associated with the Sea of Faith Network in the United Kingdom. The Sea of Faith Network takes its name from the BBC program of the same name featuring the "atheist priest" Don Cupitt, former dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Cupitt's theology cumulates in a theology of non-realism that in many ways resembles Christian Humanism and consists of a Feurbachian presentation of God as a projection of mankind and a promotion of God as a moral symbol which supports the structure of society (see Thisleton 1995: 81-117; White 1994; Ward 1997: 588-90). Post Christian is considered by its adherents to be an ideal identity marker because it provides a means to represent Christianity as an evolutionary faith—in this instance, the point is to evolve beyond a Christo-centric religion (not beyond religion itself). The Sea of Faith Network also has chapters in Australia and New Zealand. Progressive Christianity in Australia is also represented by several networks. Regardless of labels, the movement as a whole shares certain commonalities. Central to my research is the authority granted to "intellectual integrity," which usually is manifest through popular theological texts that question or dismiss the divinity or existence of Jesus and other traditional biblical narratives.
the position of proselytizers of a new reformation, advancing a non-theistic vision of Christianity that they believe will reinvigorate the church and result in a return of former adherents. Instead of focusing and relying on traditional faith narratives, this movement organizes itself around the production and consumption of texts that are deemed foundational and give authority to scholarly reconstructions of the historical Jesus. For many communities and individuals the initial foray into progressive Christianity is one that is facilitated through reading these texts, either collectively or individually. These texts are exemplified by the works of best-selling authors such as Canadian Tom Harpur (The Pagan Christ), Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong (Why Christianity Must Change or Die), biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg (The First Christmas) and Gretta Vosper (With or Without God), who is a United Church of Canada minister and founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.

As popular theologians and biblical scholars, these authors seek to "modernize" Christian beliefs and practice by suggesting that traditional teachings regarding the origins of Christianity are false or misleading and must be either re-written or rejected. For example, Spong writes: "unless theological truths can be separated from pre-scientific understandings and rethought in ways consistent with our understanding of reality, the Christian faith will be reduced to one more ancient mythology that will take its place alongside the religions of Mount Olympus" (Spong 1992: 31). Progressive Christians identify the persistence of "pre-scientific understandings" as the reasons that mainline contemporary churches continue to experience a decline in members. As such, Spong and others see it as their mandate to dispel the mythological components of Christian belief by repackaging critical biblical scholarship
into a format that is accessible to the laity, with the assumption that to do so will reinvigorate the church.

Following the points above, this dissertation critically investigates the reception of biblical criticism and popular theology among progressive Christians. My research is based upon two-and-a-half years of ethnographic fieldwork at five churches, all of which have self-identified as progressives and regularly study popular texts that challenge traditional theological assertions. My initial foray into these communities has been as a participant in their discussion and book study groups, but I have also attended church services, potluck dinners, movie nights, conferences, speaker series and coffee hours. My participation in and informal discussions during these events are supplemented by seventy in-depth interviews. In this dissertation I seek to ask and answer the following questions about the construction of religion: How does one decide what constitutes their 'religious' self? How are varieties of the religious self formed? How and where do religious identities converge with other dimensions of one's identity? I argue that for progressive Christians the identity of the heretic, deviant and believer in exile creates a powerful space for them to reconfigure the Christian tradition—its beliefs, practices and identity markers.

While maintaining belief as the primary marker of Christianity, progressive Christians construct their version of Christianity primarily through assertions of what they do not or cannot believe, rather than what they do believe. Following this logic, theologian Delwin Brown begins his recent book, *What does a Progressive Christian Believe?* (2008), by discussing 'what progressive Christianity is not.' Brown positions progressive Christianity in opposition to the Christianity of Pat Robinson, Jerry Falwell and James Dobson, as well as in distinction to liberal Christianity, which he maintains is too rooted in Enlightenment ideals
of individualism and universal truths (cf. Cobb 2008). In many ways, this negative articulation of belief is a process of self-purification not unlike that pursued by other Christian groups (see Keane 2007; Bielo 2011a). When asked what they do believe, progressive Christians tend to respond with amorphous, non-specific concepts focussing on the importance of 'justice', 'love' and 'community'. The promotion of these terms certainly supports Michel de Certeau's observation that ideas (especially beliefs) can be transported from one ideological site to another through a process of differentiating superstition and conviction (1984: 178ff).

Some scholars have concluded that the term progressive is interchangeable with "liberal" (see Evans 2010). This interchanging of terms may certainly be the case with some progressive Christian groups, especially those in the United States. Indeed, extensive monitoring of progressive Christian online media—including blogs, Facebook, wiki portals, etc.—reveals that for many the term remains little more than a repackaging of what has traditionally been understood as liberal Protestantism. In contrast, my interlocutors report that while they see themselves as emerging out of the liberal tradition theirs is a novel religiosity.

For example, at the 2009 bi-annual national Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity Conference, president of the organization, Gretta Vosper, explained to the audience: "In the early days of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, when we reflected upon what church was like for us, people talked about experiences of isolation—either because they felt like they couldn't speak openly or the only church they could find was a conservative one." Commenting on these experiences of isolation, Vosper was critical of the language and intellectualism that she perceives in liberal Christianity, arguing that
academic deconstructions do not go far enough. From Vosper's perspective the practice of
the liberal church is to study the historical context of the Christian narrative and adopt a
nuanced understanding of theology and ritual without actually altering their practices and
language.\(^\text{17}\) In Vosper's view, the liberal church is at fault because language and rituals need
to be transparent; they need to clearly communicate what is going on to someone who is an
outsider to Christianity. She continues by asking where those who are unfamiliar with
Christianity will find a spiritual home: "People won't be fed by a message that uses language
that they don't have the tools to deconstruct. No, obviously, people are going to end up in
evangelical settings which tell them that their needs will be met and that they will be better
off with the church."\(^\text{18}\)

Along the same lines, Spong (1991) makes the following comments about the liberal
church: "[they are] by definition fuzzy, imprecise, and relatively unappealing. They might
claim to be honest, but for the most part they have no real message. They tinker with words,
redefine concepts, and retreat slowly behind the rear guard protection of a few pseudoradical
thinkers" (1991: 35). Turning his attention to problems of conservative Christianity, Spong
points out that they "seem to be expending all of their meagre energy on the hopeless task of
doing a facelift on the corpse of traditional Christian religion, employing images that have
lost their meaning." Spong's final prediction of the fate of conservative Christianity is the

\(^{17}\) For example, a liberal Christian might say that she does not believe that the Eucharist or Communion meal is
about atonement but that she enjoys the ritual and therefore permits the ritual act even though she disagrees with
its traditional theological interpretation. However, this is not going far enough for Vosper, who argues that new
rituals should be incorporated to replace those which are no longer intellectually viable from a modern and
empirical perspective.

\(^{18}\) The above quotations from Vosper are put together from my notes from the 2009 bi-annual Canadian Centre
for Progressive Christianity conference. I took detailed notes as she was delivering this address but because of
the nature of note-taking, this is not a word-for-word transcription. The emphasis that Vosper and other
progressive Christians place on language as transparent is interesting given that they are not opposed to
providing spaces for mystery when it comes to psychological and experiential states. For example, progressive
Christians will speak about the mystery of love or friendship as being perhaps indescribable, but only because it
is empirically experienced by the individual(s) in question and thus does not require description.
ominous statement that, like the liberal church, "they too, will ultimately fail" (1991: 35-36). Thus, progressive Christianity seeks to create a space for itself that is distinct from both liberal and conservative Christianity. For example, as one of my interlocutors, Sam, explained in an interview:

You've got the fundamentalist side of things, you've got the liberal side of things and the two don't speak the same language or have the same belief on all that stuff. And I don't frankly believe that the fundamentalists have anything and I don't believe the liberals have anything either. You know? I think they're both arguing the wrong argument. So there's nothing for me to engage, I'm just, you know, its water from the shower head, you know.19 But I wanted to find out more about the mentality of it. And that [progressive Christianity] was good for that.

In constructing a progressive Christian subject, the Christians in this study, in many ways, have transformed members of conservative and liberal Christian traditions into objects against which their own distinctiveness can be defined (cf. Keane 2002: 65). While it is difficult to discern the relative value of this process of othering liberals and evangelicals or fundamentalists, Sam's comments suggest that doing so allows him to disengage with those opinions or ways of being Christian that he dislikes or thinks are wrong. Instead, he is able to focus on progressive Christianity as somehow occupying a different category or modality.

Theoretical Frameworks: The Anthropology of Christianity

As an ethnographic project focused on the construction of progressive Christianity in relation to a wider field of Christianities, my dissertation is aligned with the newly emerging field of the anthropology of Christianity. The research in which I am engaged most closely draws upon anthropological theories of language ideology through which the Christian

19 Sam's commentary here and his use of the 'shower head' image suggests that he feels that the arguments from both sides— liberal and conservative—have the same effect and consequences. Ultimately he seems to be suggesting that both are equally meaningless or insignificant.
subject is constructed, maintained and legitimized (Stromberg 1993; Harding 2000; Keane 2007). More specifically I look at study and discussion groups featuring popular theological texts and seek to delineate the type of Christianity constructed through the interplay between the texts and their readers in a group setting (cf. Bielo 2009a; Boyarin 1993; Cannell 2005b; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Wuthnow 1994a, 1994b). The subjects of my study are engaged in a two-tiered interpretive process: a dialogue format derived from a standard church bible study and textual sources selected specifically because they challenge and refute a traditional Christian worldview, especially in regards to the authority of ecclesiastical structures and biblical canon. Through this social process of refutation, the Christians that I study are attempting to self-consciously redefine what it means to create a Christianity that is simultaneously Christian by choice and secular by necessity.20

This undertaking is of particular interest to scholars of religion because progressive Christians undergo a process of familiarisation with biblical criticism, albeit in a highly theologised and popularised form. My project pursues Jonathan Z. Smith's recent address to the Society of Biblical Literature in which he appealed for ethnographic accounts of contemporary and historical textual and biblical interpretations (see Smith 2009: 9-13). I suggest that an anthropological examination of the means through which liberal and progressive Christians make use of biblical criticism as a venue for the formation of a distinct way of being Christian is important to an overall understanding of popular Christianity, especially in North America.

20 I should note that progressive Christians, like other mainline Christians, see themselves as secular because they are actively engaged in the 'secular' world through work, education, politics and cultural experiences. Calling themselves secular provides an additional means through which they are able to distinguish themselves from fundamentalist Christians who they see as withdrawing from society.
While anthropological studies of Christianity and of Christians are not new, the recent anthropological 'turn' towards the study of Christianity has self-consciously set itself as a comparative project with shared methodological concerns. In his groundbreaking article on the anthropology of Christianity, Joel Robbins (2003b) notes that an anthropology of Christianity as what he terms "a self-conscious comparative project" is needed, even though there have been many anthropological studies of Christian communities and Christian individuals (2003b: 191; see also Bialecki et al. 2008). In identifying Christianity as a fluid and multivariate topic of study, Robbins and others seek to establish a diverse scholarly community with a shared set of questions and methodological concerns. According to Robbins, the scholarly reticence of anthropologists to examine Christianity arises, in part, from the shared cultural assumptions on the part of Christianity and anthropology (cf. Keller 2005: 41). Christianity, seemingly, has been perceived as both too similar and too different for serious anthropological consideration, and its subjects occupy a position that Susan Harding identifies as the 'culturally repugnant other' (Harding 1991). Harding's close examination of the Christian subject—in her fieldwork, the Bible-believing fundamentalist—reveals that certain modern discursive practices represent the Christian subject as antithetical to "modernity" (1991: 374). In doing so, Harding claims that a problem emerges in which the Christian subject as 'the culturally repugnant other' is delineated through a dialogical process that renders the modern perspective as hegemonic, thereby restricting our access to the Christian subject apart from that generative discourse (Harding 1991).

In Harding's case, she explained that her work should have received the same treatment as any other minority group being examined by a non-native anthropologist but Harding found that her research was subject to ruthless interrogation from her colleagues in
an attempt to discern whether or not she shared the ideologies and religious beliefs of her subjects of study (1991: 375). Such assumptions position the Christian subject as antithetical to modernity and secularism. Harding's influential and self-reflexive work brings the Christian subject into scholarly focus by demanding that anthropologists not only view the contemporary Christian subject seriously as a topic for examination but also that they use this examination as a venue in which to challenge and recast the discipline's categories of analyses. Moreover, Robbins identifies such a task as crucial for the anthropology of Christianity to proceed as a comparative project. According to Robbins, "it is the closeness of Christianity that makes its otherness so potent: repugnance in this case can be explained in classic anthropological terms as a response to an anomalous mixture of the similar and the different" (2003b: 193). Only by engaging both its otherness and likeness does the anthropologist provide a 'thick' description of the Christian subject.

More recently, the field has focused upon an assessment of the Christian subject as being fluid, thereby challenging those historical and anthropological definitions that align the Christian subject with a secular one. Scholars have noted that the field should perceive itself as the study of Christianities, rather than Christianity, and proceed with caution from that point. Fenella Cannell (2005b) identifies the perception of a shared heritage as part of the reluctance of anthropologists to undertake projects pertaining to Christianity. Cannell observes that "where Christianity was theorised . . . the approach tended to stress its ascetic components above all else and to assume that it would be premised on an antagonism between the body and the spirit" (2005b: 340). When combined with the Weberian notion that pinpoints (Protestant) Christianity as the precursor for secular modernity in which the modern social sciences locate themselves, the study of the Christian subject is, according to
Cannell, too narrow (2005a: 335). Cannell, quite controversially, proclaims that not only is this a limited representation of the Christian experience in need of redefinition but also that the discipline of anthropology itself must re-evaluate the ways in which it has been repressed by incorporating a version of asceticism derived from Augustinian thinking within its own scholarly categories in regards to its self-understanding as a secular discipline (2005a: 34; but see Hann 2007, discussed below).

What can be made, then, of Christian subjects, such as the ones I study, who adopt the rhetoric of secularism and employ it as a means of subverting traditional definitions of Christianity while maintaining a clear self-understanding as authentic and legitimate Christians? This dissertation suggests that an examination of the process by which progressive Christians construct their theology provides the anthropology of Christianity with a comparative venue that further addresses Cannell’s concerns. Moreover, I argue that the anthropologist must seriously consider the representational practices of progressive Christians who self-identify as heretics within a hegemonic social system.

I make the above argument because a problem that exists for anthropologists attempting to interpret the beliefs and practices of North American Christians—not to mention within the larger debates of what constitutes a Christian or post-Christian—is their position as inheritors of, and contributors to, a hegemonic status and worldview. While some scholars within the anthropology of Christianity have called for an extension of such research into more familiar landscapes, the majority within the field focus their attention on Christianity in regions where it is primarily a missionary or convert culture. While those working within North America (Biello 2009a; 2011a; Elisha 2011; Bialecki 2009b) have begun to respond to the problems I have raised here, their works continue to explore
communities that are somehow 'other' to academic enterprises (Harding 1991: 374). As mainline Protestants in North America, progressive Christians are clearly located in a hegemonic position; they share many of the assumptions made by anthropologists and scholars of religion and can be classified as sharing the same socio-economic, political and geographical characteristics (Zwissler 2007). That being said, in light of their non-traditional theologies, progressive Christians understand themselves as heretics or deviants in relation to an evangelical or fundamentalist Christian 'other', as exemplified by the American Christian Right, which has dominated the American public imagination as of late and is seen by progressive Christians as a hegemonic force (see Evans 2010: 3-4).

Observers of North American liberal Christianity have noted its intersections with, and contributions to, the manifestation of the secular liberal subject. Liberal Protestantism especially has been noteworthy in its focus upon inter-religious ecumenism and sexual inclusivity, both of which have garnered criticism from their contemporaries in the evangelical Christian Right. While much attention has been directed toward Christian communities that actively oppose secularisation, my research draws attention to religious communities who accept many aspects of secularism and attempt to adapt their theologies to it. For example, in his three volume series, The Making of American Liberal Theology, Gary Dorrien provides an excellent intellectual history and a genealogy of liberal Christianity in America and its attempts to establish itself as "a rational and experiential third way between authority-based orthodoxies and secular disbelief" (2006: 55; see also and cf., Albanese

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21 Robert Wuthnow (1998: 60-72), relying heavily on Northrop Frye, argues that the predominance of conservative rhetoric stems, in part, from its discursive structure that focuses upon centripetal (literal, historical) rather than centrifugal (metaphorical) meanings within the bible. This privileging of one approach over the other results in an overall simplification of religious discourse, which I suggest finds success within the public sphere because of its clarity and univocality. For an interesting discussion on the effects of the Christian Right on Canadian political theologies, see Bean, et al. 2008.
2007; Emberley 2002; Schmidt 2005). Dorrien credits the contributions of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century philosophy and higher criticism as contributing to the development of an intellectual history of liberal Protestantism. The contemporary manifestation of progressive theologies may be traced to a wide range of thinkers, including Ludwig Feuerbach, Albrecht Ritschl, Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Dorrien and others convincingly argue the convergence of variant spiritualities into a liberal American theology but this does not reveal the whole story. My interlocutors have little interest in the genealogy of their theologies and instead emphasise the novelty of their theology both for themselves personally and for North American Christianity as a whole (cf. Bender 2010: 4). With this in mind, ethnographic studies focusing on the grassroots are a necessary companion to these intellectual histories (cf. Bielo 2011a: 199).

As Chris Hann (2007) maintains, "we still do not have much by way of ethnographic studies of mainstream Christianity in countries such as Britain and the United States" where, for the most part, anthropologists of Christianity locate their institutional homes (2007:384).²² Hann's observations, of course, extend to Canada, and my project, which has been conceived to draw contemporary North American progressive Christians into the field in order to make use of the important themes and methods of the anthropology of Christianity, attempts to respond to Hann's call, thereby expanding the anthropology of Christianity by bringing it closer to home. Susan Harding's work, of course, focuses on North American Christianity but her interlocutors stood in relation to her and to her discipline as

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²² It may appear counter-intuitive to describe progressive Christians as "mainstream." Ultimately, however, despite their so-called heretical beliefs, progressive Christians can be classified under the umbrella of mainline and liberal Protestants. In Chapter Two of my dissertation I discuss this classification at length. Additionally, this chapter examines the fact that for the most part progressive Christians are middle-class and white and therefore assume the cultural logics and practices of white middle-class North America. This socio-cultural location furthermore justifies my point that progressive Christians are part of the mainstream and, despite the fact that they might themselves object to this classification, I see my work as responding directly to Hann's call for anthropological studies of mainstream Christianity.
the 'culturally repugnant other'. The Christians whom I study identify me as one of them—i.e., a secular liberal with commitments towards humanitarian causes and other accruals of the modern individualism. Whether or not I identify them as 'other' becomes a moot point, as they have very clearly aligned themselves with me.23

Furthermore, the progressive Christians that I study may be regarded as close to home in the discipline of religious studies. They are by far the largest non-scholarly consumers of the fruits of the religious studies scholar's labour. Indeed, especially in the areas of Christian Origins scholarship and the Sociology of Religion, progressive Christians are well-read and often I found myself having to do "homework" in order to engage them on these topics, which are extremely important to them.

Following Pamela Klassen (2011), I position my subjects within the anthropology of Christianity as a means of articulating their theology and worldview as both heretical and hegemonic in North American liberal Christianity. Klassen's work relies upon both ethnographic and historical analysis to look at the rhetoric of healing in twentieth-century liberal Protestantism. Her analysis highlights a Christian modality that has transitioned from heretical to hegemonic and back again on several occasions. In relation to the newly emerging anthropology of Christianity, important questions concerning the study of mainline North American religions must be posed: Is there a difference between the ethnography of

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23 This experience is quite different from that which many anthropologists of North American Christianity encounter. Since I have been identified as occupying a similar secular worldview and interest in deconstructing religion I am not represented as a potential convert (or de-convert, to use a more appropriate term). But in other ways, I would say that my status as a graduate student and de facto member of the academic world provided a comparable potentiality as the 'could-be convert' serves for evangelicals. The enthusiasm and pride with which my interlocutors explained my presence at their church to other progressive communities and the affection with which they labelled me as 'our' PhD student reveals that I did represent access to a scholarly community to which they also desired admission, or at least, acknowledgement. Likewise, despite my statement below that I feel that whether or not I see them as 'other' is a moot point, in purposefully selecting progressive Christianity as a whole and the five churches featured in this dissertation as the subject of my ethnographic investigation, I am reifying a dialogical relationship, in which observing the 'other' is the central theme.
status quo ("religio-normative" communities) and marginalised or colonial religions? More specifically, what is the significance of the study of contemporary Christianity in light of its historical position as a hegemonic discourse in the West? And finally, how does the contemporary self-representation as deviants and heretics by the Christians I study affect anthropological and scholarly analyses of this movement?

William Garriott and Kevin Lewis O'Neill's (2008) call for a dialogical approach to the subject is most helpful. This dialogical approach addresses what Garriott and O'Neill identify as the core problem of Christianity itself: its perceptual ambiguity concerning who is and who is not a Christian; a problem with which Christians themselves are preoccupied (2008: 387-8). The anthropology of Christianity has generated a robust body of scholarship that has located Christianity outside of its regular framework. For instance, the work of Matthew Engelke (2004) examines African Christians who reject the bible, and the fieldwork of Olivia Harris (2006) focuses on Christians who perceive themselves to be incomplete. A cross-cultural comparative project in the anthropology of Christianity concerned with the means by which Christians subvert their own terms in order to re-inscribe their version of Christianity expands our overall understanding of contemporary Christianity, while engaging abstractly with how scholars and Christians define Christianity.

In this vein, my fieldwork reveals that consumers of popular theological texts consider their movement to be brand-new—something controversial, whispered about in church basements and adopted by only those courageous enough to stand up to the mighty forces of fundamentalism and to (partially) align themselves with secularism. The locution of 'believers in exile' is a representation that generates a tension between a traditional Christian worldview and a fully secular one. As exiles, heretics and deviants, the Christians I study
position themselves within a secular culture—understanding themselves to have been expelled from the discourses of traditional, conservative or fundamentalist Christianity as it is portrayed in the public sphere, primarily the media—and in doing so they enact a process of resistance in relation to the Christian 'other' by continuing to lay claim to a Christian alias. However, by maintaining a Christian identity—one which they perceive as a more authentic "original" version of Christianity—they resist pure secularity, arguing that there is power within Christian praxis.

Language Ideologies

Scholars in the field of the anthropology of Christianity have focused on and explicitly explored language ideologies and the use of language as a tactic for the creation of the Christian self. As Bialecki et al. (2008) note the focus upon language should not come as a surprise, given the importance that Christianity itself has placed upon language in regards to the biblical text, the image of Christ as the 'Word of God', and the significance of verbal testimony and confession within contemporary Protestantisms and Catholicisms (Bialecki et al. 2008: 1146). Within a North American context, contemporary Christians share with Euro-American Western societies an emphasis upon referential language ideologies (Stromberg 1993; Silverstein 1979; Bielo 2011b: 634). Peter Stromberg explains that a referential language ideology is one in which language is thought to function in such a way that linguistic symbols, or words, transmit distinct meanings (such as when one looks up a specific word or term in the dictionary) (Stromberg 1993: 7). In the referential realm, what is being said matters more than how it is said. In the example above, Vosper criticizes the liberal church for using language that she views as not transparent. She contends that "people
won't be fed by a message that uses language that they don't have the tools to deconstruct," and further articulates that churches need to be clear in their use of terms so that someone who is unfamiliar to Christianity will be able to follow what is being said both within religious services and by individuals discussing their faith.

According to Stromberg, a referential language ideology is "part of the very foundation of our social order" (1993: 9). From it we assume a specific "taken for granted" or "common sense" outlook concerning the nature of subjectivity, external realities, communicative modes and the ability of language to communicate between the inner-self (thoughts) and the outer world (words). This perspective, as Keane notes, signifies a relationship between the inner and outer worlds whereby one can ascertain an adherent's thoughts through an evaluation of their words (Keane 2002: 74).

Scholars working within this field have sought to extend or substantiate Keane's (2002; 2007) presentation of 'sincerity' as the central concern animating Christian understandings of the purpose and necessity of referential language. According to Keane, the term sincerity is particularly interesting "because of the links it forges among language, social interaction, personal character, freedom, regimes of truth, and some narratives of modernity" (2002: 65). Keane illustrates the evaluatory standard inherent in the morality of language by turning to the seventeenth-century English poet and polemicist John Milton and his concern about fixed or formulaic prayers confining the Christian individual to a fixed experience in which he or she is forced to submit his or herself "to the outward dictates of men" (Milton quoted in Keane 2007: 1). In other words the act of reciting a prayer that someone else has written submits the speaker to the will of the individual who originally
wrote the prayer. In such a case, all agency is lost and the facility for sincerity dissolves. Milton's notion that prescribed prayer lacks authenticity and denies human agency is shared by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch Calvinist missionaries and Sumbanese converts on the Indonesian Island of Sumba (the subjects of Keane's ethnography), as well as by contemporary Christians, including the twenty-first century North American progressive Christian communities of this study.

Keane's seminal work, *Christian Moderns* (2007), has provided anthropologists of Christianity with the means of locating the spaces where Christianity and modernity meet in moral and linguistic realms. Keane outlines what he calls a 'semiotic ideology,' which "links political power and the spiritual disciplines of the self" (2007: 2). Specifically, this semiotic ideology is indicative of a morality of language ascribing agency to certain words or subjects but not to others. Keane maintains that in doing so, this semiotic ideology is linked to a specific "moral narrative of modernity," which in turn constructs certain norms applicable to the human agent or subject (2007: 197). Following from this notion of human subjectivity, Keane suggests that there is for Christian Moderns, particularly Protestants, an assumed interior state of being that may be deemed to be either sincere or insincere when aligned with a subject's external expressions. More succinctly stated, sincerity is revealed when the subject's words (and actions) match her inner beliefs and feelings and are judged to be sincere by the subject herself or

24 Keane's use of the term 'semiotic' is intended to be expansive. He explains that it includes "sounds of words, the constraints of speech genres, the perishability of books, the replicable shapes of money, the meatiness of animals, the feel of cloth, the shape of houses, musical tones, the fleshiness of human bodies, and the habits of physical gestures" (2007: 5-6).
other subjects. As such, the authority of religious language, and its use, is rooted in personal experience and observations.

The most important component of this understanding of language is that there is a perceived intentionality that is attached to one's linguistic act. In everyday speech acts the task is then to determine whether or not one's intention is aligned with one's words and actions (e.g. when a Christian proclaims herself to have been "born again," this inner transformation is determined to have actually occurred when she models the behaviour and beliefs of a born again Christian). While sincerity is difficult enough to decipher in relation to one agent, Christian notions of sincerity are even more difficult to discern when they involve multiple actors (as is the case in texts, prayers, prophecies and other ritualized and performed language-acts). James Bielo (2011b) picks up Erving Goffman's use of the triad animator-author-principle in exploring the way that sincerity creates specific notions of the self in relation to language use involving multiple agents (Bielo 2011b: 633; see also Goffman 1979). In this schema the author (with whom the words originate) and the animator (or speaker) are regulated by the principal which, as Bielo clarifies, "is ultimately responsible for both the words and their social-moral-spiritual consequences" (2011b: 633). The evangelicals that Bielo studies are, like Milton, resistant to prayers that are recited by rote but they do make allowances for speech-acts in which the human individual submits agency to another author, provided that author is divine. For example, certain ritualized speech acts are understood as "inspired," meaning that they claim divine authorship by either God or the Holy Spirit. This means that those instances where the speaker/ animator is not the original author—as in the case of prophecy or scripture—are considered especially sacred and meaningful.
Comparatively, the progressive Christians featured in this dissertation are likewise informed by concerns for sincerity in regards to performed and ritualized speech-acts. In the absence of a divine force or God—progressive Christians do not practice prophecy or tongues and consider the bible and traditional prayers to be authored by humans not God—they seek to establish this sincerity between each other as a means of revealing and animating two related concepts: intellectual integrity and what I call an 'ethics of belief'. The pairing of intellectual endeavours and morality in the form of integrity creates an interesting side-step for progressive Christians in comparison to the language ideology held by other forms of Christianity. For a progressive Christian extra-Christian intellectual knowledge is imperative to understanding their own faith tradition. Without extra-Christian intellectual knowledge in the form of biblical criticism, scientific empiricism and liberal morality, according to this view, a Christian is unable to truly read the bible or understand her tradition—a problem which not only reveals a lack of understanding but also a lack of character. For example, without historical biblical criticism, one does not know that Matthew's and Luke's use of the term 'virgin' in reference to Jesus' mother Mary is the result of using a mistranslation of Isaiah. Likewise, without scientific empiricism, one might not know that individuals are not miraculously healed of infectious diseases, or that it is impossible for a person to walk on water. Finally, without liberal morality one might be mistaken enough to believe that homosexuals and witches should be stoned. With this extra knowledge, a progressive Christian is able to reject these components of the Christian narrative and doctrine. Thus, for progressive Christians, intellectual integrity is a form of sincerity that is accompanied by an imperative to act and direct one's beliefs. Intellectual integrity requires investigation, which
most often is conducted by reading and discussing popular theological texts, addressing themes of biblical criticism, scientific empiricism and liberal morality.

Related to the concept of intellectual integrity is the ethics of belief, which posits that it is unethical to believe something that one knows to be untrue or immoral. This system weaves together belief and language with morality or ethics. For example, in his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998), Spong argues that the notion of God as an interventionalist deity, that is, as a God that answers prayers is immoral. Discussing the Hebrew bible's depiction of God, Spong points out that the deity comes across as "clearly pro-Jewish" in his interventions:

After freeing the Jews from slavery in Egypt by visiting great violence on the Egyptians, God lead the marauding Israelites in their conquest of the land of Canaan. God had championed his people in their continuing conflict with the Philistines. One can only imagine that such a view of God was wildly popular among the Jews. It was not, however, a very pleasant view of God if you happen to be Egyptian, Canaanite, or a Philistine. A universal God of love this deity was not (Spong 1998: 30).

The deity has been depicted as intervening on behalf of one-side (the Israelites) and not the other (the Egyptians, Canaanites, or Philistines). Spong judges this interventionalist version of God to be immoral or unethical because its treatment is not the same for all people. Additionally, anyone who claims to believe in a God that intervenes is likewise judged to be unethical. For progressive Christians it becomes imperative that they completely reject the notion of God intervening in their lives in any way—a task which for some is easier said than done.

For example, progressive Christians often speak of mistakenly evoking an interventionalist deity. A common example that they provide is when one is in their car looking for a parking space at the mall. The progressive Christian might inadvertently think
or say, "please let me find a parking spot." This request is interpreted as being directed towards a divine or otherworldly force that has the power to intervene and make a parking spot appear. Whether or not the progressive Christian actually believes in a force that has the power to generate a parking spot for them is a moot point. According to their language ideology, their request—even if it is only thought and not spoken aloud—is a problem because it aligns them with the notion of an interventionist God who is just as willing to slaughter the innocent children of the Egyptians, Canaanites, or Philistines as it is willing to miraculously materialize a free parking space. In inadvertently praying for a parking space, a progressive Christian accidentally supports a theology representative of God favouring certain groups while punishing others with its wrath. Because such a theological position is seen as unethical, participating in this discourse—even inadvertently—generates guilt for progressive Christians.

The above example is one that illustrates the ways that the ethics of belief becomes an imperative for progressive Christians. Sincerity is not something that comes naturally but rather is something that one must constantly and carefully seek to achieve and maintain. The scenario described above involves everyday speech-acts; however, this dissertation reveals that intellectual integrity and the ethics of belief are most often a concern for progressive Christians in regards to ritualized and performed statements. These statements do not claim any divine authorship, but rather they are understood as having been written by and for humans. The progressive Christian churches featured in this dissertation all emerged out of mainline liberal Protestant denominations, and therefore have an established liturgical order that is used in their services. In adopting a progressive Christian theology, one of the first steps taken is to rewrite prayers and liturgies so that they more accurately reflect a
progressive Christian worldview. For example, at West Hill United Church, the Lord's Prayer is no longer recited; instead the children lead the congregation in the recitation of a version of the Prayer of St. Francis. At Holy Cross Lutheran Church, the words of the communion service have been altered so that they diminish the focus on the sacrifice of Jesus and images of blood and death, but rather the service focuses on images of community, fellowship and sharing. Finally, at St. Matthias Anglican Church the community has opted to use an overhead projector, rather than a book of services so that they might alter the words of the service as they see fit. In each of the communities featured in this dissertation, Vosper's point of the need to be clear about their use of language is echoed. Newcomers to the community are encouraged to join the book study and discussion groups, references to an interventionalist God are avoided and sermons focus on deconstructing biblical texts, discussing how they have been misinterpreted in the past and offering a new interpretation that more readily aligns with a progressive Christian worldview.  

Research Methodology

In total I studied five communities—two United Church of Canada, two Anglican and one Lutheran. I spent at least six months with each community, although at some, like West Hill United Church, I attended events and services and participated in their book studies throughout the two-and-a-half-years that I conducted fieldwork. I will offer a detailed description and analysis of the five communities I studied in Chapter Two of this dissertation. For now, I will note that I am using, with permission, the actual names of four communities I studied.

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25 The deconstruction and reinterpretation of biblical texts occurs at the churches where the bible is read during religious services. West Hill United Church does not read the bible very frequently. At St. Matthias Anglican Church the bible is read frequently, in addition to other texts, including pieces of poetry, short reflections by members of the community and works of fiction, such as the Velveteen Rabbit.
out of five of the churches I researched. The fifth community, an Anglican Church, which I will call St. Peter's, is not actually a progressive church, but rather featured a reading group that looked at progressive texts and resembled the reading groups at the other progressive churches. I met with this small reading group for a full year (September to May), and it was this small group averaging from four to ten members that was surprisingly the most diverse in its theological positions. While St. Peter's is not a progressive church, the presence of progressive thinkers in that community provided important comparative data and expanded my understanding of what is characteristic on the part of Christians in general and what is unusual in the practices of collective reading of progressive theological texts.

In fact, the diversity of theological opinions within the study group at St. Peter's became remarkably clear during our first meeting when we were asked to position ourselves in the study room according to our own theological beliefs—some members positioned themselves in the middle of the room, one woman at the far north side of the room (to indicate that she was conservative) and a few others at the far south side (declaring their affiliation with liberal leanings). Another member left the room completely by the south side to go and have a cigarette and a third opted to stand above us in the choir loft in order to indicate that he felt that he was 'above' these sorts of exercises and that his theological and ontological stance transcended the notion that one could arrange oneself on a linear continuum.

In private conversations and in my formal interviews with some of the members of this book study group it was explained to me that they did not feel like they could openly espouse a progressive theology at St. Peter's or within the religious communities in which
they participated. For this reason, to protect the identity of the members of this book study I have elected not to mention the name and location of this church. I think that they will be surprised to find themselves included in this study of progressive Christian churches, since many of them differ so much from the other communities I have studied and prior to my study knew very little about progressive Christian churches. I found my time at St. Peter's to be especially important because, I suspect, that for every congregation like West Hill United Church there are several congregations like St. Peter's that feature a few members exploring and discussing progressive theology in small study groups and a few members who identify themselves as atheists and non-theists, but who, like some of the members in St. Peter's book study group, feel that they cannot be honest with their families and faith communities about their beliefs. I am especially grateful to this community for the candour with which they shared their personal thoughts and spiritual journeys and the openness with which they invited me to participate in their conversations.

Participant observation is considered by many to be an art form. Practitioners of this methodology are resistant to attempts of formulating a concrete methodology (Jorgensen 1989: 8) and alternatively advocate that students learn it organically in the field (Coleman 2006b: 32). Participant observation is learned "on the go" rather than in classrooms and is considered a 'way of life' rather than a prescribed set of skills. As Sherry Ortner explains, anthropological fieldwork involves the use of the body as an instrument of knowing (1995:173). Anthropological fieldwork involves the ability of the researcher to develop specific relationships and therefore is as contingent upon the personality of the researcher as it is upon the theoretical approaches to anthropological study.

26 As was the case with each of the book study and discussion groups I studied, not all of the members of St. Peter's book study group were members of that church congregation.
From the perspective of the anthropology of religion, Fiona Bowie (2008) extrapolates that researchers and scholars attempt to maintain a balance between qualitative data and theoretical speculation (2008: 862). In doing so, the field offers a scholarly discussion that brings its analysis in conversation with the voice and interpretative logic of the culture or community under study. However, given its interest in scholarly debates, anthropological analysis can, at times, appear foreign to those whose religious community is being described (2008:863). Participant observation has served as a favourite methodology in anthropological circles since it was initially used and established by Malinowski, who suggests that the anthropologist's study will be heightened if she is able to immerse herself into the community so that she "sees the customs, ceremonies, transactions over and over again" (Malinowski 1922: 28). As such, participant observers declare themselves the wearers of many hats, but full participation is virtually impossible. Lila Abu-Lughod outlines the liminality of the position of the participant observer: "the anthropologist is still defined as a being who must stand apart from the Other, even when he or she seeks explicitly to bridge that gap" (1991: 141). Moreover, in the words of Amira Mittermaier, "participant observation means zooming in and taking a look from close up; it renders visible previously invisible minute details of everyday life" (2006: 15). Of course, in doing so, the anthropologist zooms in on certain subjects and objects and sometimes in such close proximity loses track of the larger picture.

When I was in my first year of university a girl in my dormitory purchased a photo-mosaic poster of Bob Marley. Photo mosaics are created using thousands of different tiny images to create a larger picture. When viewed from far away, one saw a cohesive image of Bob Marley; but when one stood closer to the picture, it revealed multiple different images of
the Rastafarian musician. One evening, her roommate cut out a tiny picture of her and pasted it over one of the images. From far away nothing appeared to have changed, but closer examination revealed a smiling picture of a college student with her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, an image which was a striking contrast amid the sea of ganja-smoking, peace-sign yielding, Marleys.

In focusing closely on her community of study, the ethnographer is able to provide insight into the many tiny images that make up the larger picture of a given community. She also, no matter how careful she is, leaves her own image on the communities she studies. In order to account for this inevitable imprint, anthropology has increasingly insisted on a reflexive account from ethnographers (Clifford and Marcus 1986). "At its worst," Bielo expounds, "'being reflexive' amounts to little more than unnecessary autobiography (navel gazing as it were)," but "at its best, 'being reflexive' scrutinizes how research is conducted and the experience of doing fieldwork, all in the pursuit of helping readers better understand the claims being made" (Bielo 2009a: 22). In a similar vein, Catherine S. Fowler echoes Malcolm Crick in declaring that all anthropology is "inherently autobiographical" (1994: 145).

For Bielo and others who work within the North American context, ethnography is conducted in communities that possess the agency to respond to scholarship. Karen McCarthy Brown (2002) notes the following:

Anthropologists used to be heroic travellers. . . . In the classic version of anthropological research, the anthropologist is the one who crosses boundaries, learns the local language and makes sense of local practices . . . Traditionally, field researchers depicted their subjects as far removed from the ethnographic writing process (something the ethnographer did "back home") (2002: 131).
But for contemporary ethnographers, often working in urban North America, the ability of, and opportunity for, the subject to respond is indispensable. While working with immigrant communities, Brown found that the experience is one of dual learning. As the ethnographer is encountering a new society, so too is the participant who frames her narrative with this new encounter: "when immigrants learn about their new local culture, they develop skills that allow them agency in the ethnographic project" (131). This relatively new venue raises questions about the relationship between ethnographer and participant. Often, the scholar is forced to reflect upon her position as critic of, and advocate for, a given religious community.

Likewise, Nancy Nason-Clark (2002), in an article discussing her research on domestic violence, points to the neglected emotional or ethical stance of the fieldworker. While Nason-Clark insists that the research process must accommodate "the rigor of the academy (and our interdisciplinary research methods and accumulated wisdom)," she feels that this process must be flexible enough to likewise address the researcher's passion as an "activist striving to change the social milieu" (2002: 29).

Anthropologists of Christianity are well prepared for the reflexive question concerning their religious practices and affiliation. An excellent model has been provided by Harding, who writes honestly about the ways in which the worldviews of the conservative Christians she studied influenced her own thought processes. As discussed above, Harding claims that her choice of subject in studying Christian fundamentalists is indicative of certain anti-orientalizing strategies being presented as available to some "others" but not to other "others." By this she means that as an ethnographer studying Christians, her motivations for choosing this topic were constantly under scrutiny. Harding relates that while conducting her
fieldwork she was perpetually asked about her religious background and whether or not she considers herself to be (or as having been) a born-again Christian. (1991: 375).

Conducting ethnographic research among practitioners of metaphysical traditions, Courtney Bender’s experience was more akin to my own. Bender notes that her subjects of study were often as familiar with academia as she was, often dropping academic names and pointing out their own scholarly pedigrees (Bender 2010: 15). Because she and her subjects of study shared the same language, educational and geographic proximity and in many cases a shared understanding of what professors and researchers do, Bender found herself 'caught' by her presumptions that her subjects of study approached the world in the same way (2010: 15-16).

Armed with accounts of reflexivity and the advice of fellow fieldworkers, I was prepared to discuss my religious background but to my surprise the topic rarely came up. Having entered into the field determined to espouse methodological atheism, which is the default position for most anthropologists (Bialecki 2009a: 22; Harding 1987; cf. Howell 2007; Bielo 2009a), I was never once asked whether or not I was Christian and only twice was the question of my own religious affiliation addressed in such a way that any significance was attributed to the answer. On one occasion, in my introductory meeting with the small study group at St. Peter’s Anglican Church, I was asked if I was Anglican. The question followed immediately from my presentation to the group of my research proposal at a point where I asked the community if they had any further questions or concerns about my potential participation in the study group. While I cannot be completely certain, I interpreted the question "are you Anglican?", based upon the tone with which it was asked, to suggest that they may have been more concerned had my answer been "no." I am unable to determine
whether or not this is the case because I was baptised in and have ties to the Anglican Church. Once I responded affirmatively the subject of my affiliation was dropped and no further questions (or objections) were raised.

On another occasion after an evening spent at the home of a younger couple debating and delving into questions about what it means to be a progressive Christian, they asked me for my definition of progressive Christianity and whether I felt that I was a progressive Christian. In this instance, I drew upon Hal Taussig's definition of progressive Christianity (2006: 25-34; see above) and admitted that while I share many of the social commitments of progressive Christianity and feel that their theological project is an important one, I do not consider myself to be a progressive Christian. From there the conversation shifted to my own religious affiliations and my Anglican identity. This couple, from St. Matthias Anglican Church, attended the Anglican Church and had baptised their son in this community but the father had been raised Roman Catholic and the mother had grown up in the United Church. They were interested to learn what it had been like to grow up in the Anglican Church and how I felt about major issues within the Anglican Communion, specifically the current controversies surrounding sexuality and equal marriage.

On other occasions, religious affiliations and denominational background came up as a less significant reference point. The Lutheran community in Newmarket, Ontario contained a former Anglican priest and his wife. Both formally joined the Lutheran Church during my fieldwork there, and we often joked together that Lutherans were like Anglicans but with a better founder and beer instead of sherry.

While my religious affiliation was not a point of discussion, I tried as much as possible to 'fit' into the communities that I was studying. From the beginning of my research
project I was determined to participate fully in the religious ceremonies of the communities I was studying. This participation included reciting prayers, taking communion, singing hymns, bringing baked goods to social events and contributing to the offering plate. I suspect that the communities I studied saw me as an insider because I knew the words and melodies and, in certain instances, the actions that accompanied their songs. I was also familiar with the biblical and theological contexts of discussions and the fancy—albeit outdated—church words that are so important within Anglican communities in particular. I worked hard to be a member of the communities I studied and believe that I was successful as evidenced by comments from parishioners. For example, at George Street United Church, a woman whose pew I often shared turned to me after one service and remarked, "I always love to watch you sing the hymns. I can see in your eyes how much you love the songs." This is not an untrue statement. Likewise, I knew that I had fully immersed myself in Holy Cross Lutheran Church when at one point I stood up after a service to make an announcement about my research, and Pastor Dawn remarked to the congregation, "I don't know how Rebekka is going to study us, she's one of us!"

While I chose to participate fully in church life and theological discussions, I made a conscious effort not to participate in such a way that I thought my contribution would alter the trajectory of a conversation or discussion. When asked a direct question I worked hard to offer an answer that would be representative of a middle-of-the-road progressive Christian. Having studied this movement extensively from the perspective of a linguistic anthropologist I did not find it difficult to adopt the specific linguistic tropes that would position me as an 'insider' during conversations.
My experiences at the five churches I studied was unlike that of my colleagues in the anthropology of Christianity who struggle with conversion attempts by their interlocutors and are often forced to define their theology or identify themselves as religious agents (see for example O'Neill 2010: xiii). Like R. Marie Griffith (1997), I found that my age was the largest point of distinction within the communities I studied (I estimate that at least ninety percent of my interlocutors were over fifty and many were in their seventies, eighties and nineties). In many instances, my participation in the community was interpreted as an opportunity for members of the church to 'pick my brain' as to how they could begin to attract young people to their church. I was often called upon in group discussions to report on what young people thought or wanted in terms of religious activities. In these conversations I always attempted to direct the conversation away from what I thought or believed and to focus my observations on the students in my classes at the University of Toronto. My reason for doing this was twofold. First, I do not think that I am representative of a typical 20-something when it comes to religion. As a scholar of religion my interests in the history and tradition may not reflect those of people my age. Second, by discussing my students I was able to point to the multiculturalism that is assumed by the average university student in Toronto. I wanted to show indirectly that for most people my age notions of religious affiliation reflect an understanding of affiliation not limited to the practice of attending religious services regularly but often have to do with cultural affiliations and practices.

On one occasion, Holy Cross Lutheran Church held what they called an *Agape* meal. Different members of the congregation were sent to different parishioners' homes to discuss their vision for the future of the church. After discussing a variety of topics my group of about twenty or so moved to the topic of attracting youth to the church. I initially sat back

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27 *Agape*, is a Greek term found throughout the Christian bible and is often translated to mean love.
until the conversation turned towards a discussion of how and where the community could find young people—potential locations included the mall, schools, sports clubs, the internet, etc.—and how evangelical and conservative churches manage to attract and retain young people in their churches, at which point I interrupted, "maybe you don't need to worry about where the young people are. At those other churches they don't sit around and brainstorm about where they can find old people!" My remark garnered laughter. One woman who picked up on the point responded, "that's right! They're not coming into the Tim Horton's and saying, 'let's find some old people to come to our churches. We've gotta get those old people into our pews!'"

In many ways I was a peculiar insider to these communities and I let them form their own assumptions about me. Again while I was only once asked whether or not I am a progressive Christian, I can tell that the majority of the members assumed that I am one. Likewise they seemed to infer that I shared their political affiliations and stances. Unlike my colleagues who study conservatives and evangelicals, never once was I asked where I stood on 'hot-topic' issues like sexuality, the ordination of women, third-world democracy, immigration laws, etc.28 For the most part I share their secular humanist and liberal worldviews, although I will be the first to admit that many of the older members of the churches I studied are far more radical than I am! For instance, when one of the communities I studied decided to hide a refugee claimant in the basement of their church they did not conceal this 'secret' from me but one member did request that I not name their church when discussing this decision in my dissertation. During the 2008 provincial elections in Ontario,

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28 Even in the conversation described above with the couple who wanted to know my impressions on debates concerning sexuality and equal marriage in the Anglican Communion, they safely assumed that I support equal marriage and the ordination of GLTB clergy. Their interests were in how I understood myself as an Anglican with these perspectives in relation to the larger, worldwide Anglican Communion.
the community at George Street United Church, where I was conducting research at that
time, assumed that I supported either the local New Democratic Party candidate or the Green
Party candidate, or at the very least the Liberal Party candidate. Again, this was not an unfair
inference, given my age, education level and presence at a United Church of Canada.

In his discussion of reflexivity, Bielo points out that another thorny issue that he often
encountered with the evangelicals he studied concerned his role as an academic. In the frame
of reference of Bielo's study, the position of an academic is a troublesome one because the
academy is seen by evangelicals as a breeding ground of "liberalism," "humanism," and
""secularism" (Bielo 2009a: 40). In contrast, the communities I studied saw me as an
affirmation that their theology is of scholarly interest. On more than one occasion, I felt as
though I was being "shown off" at conferences and community events. My training in
religious history and biblical criticism was seen as an asset and I was often called upon to
provide dates and the names of texts or theological movements when another member of the
community drew a blank on specific details. While I was the only anthropologist in the room,
there were many others with advanced degrees in religious studies, theology, history and
other fields of study. Each of my communities contained university professors, as well as
those who had completed masters degrees, doctorates or other advanced professional degrees
and generally were well acquainted with the academic process. For example, one member of
West Hill United Church was completing an MA in my department and another worked for
the University of Toronto's research ethics board. Surprisingly—or perhaps not so
surprisingly—it was around these members of the communities whom I often felt the most
uncomfortable but to whom I am most indebted for reminding me of the importance of
honesty, reflexivity, and rigorous transparency throughout the ethnographic process.
Outline of dissertation chapters

This dissertation is organized into three parts that correspond roughly to the temporal orientation and linguistic concerns of progressive Christians. In the first chapter, I provide a historical discussion of skepticism in Canadian Protestantism. I do so as a way of offering skepticism rather than secularization as the framework through which to understand the experiences of Canadian Protestants in the nineteenth- and twentieth century. In writing this chapter, I have had to be, for the sake of brevity and sanity, selective of who and what to include in my discussion and analysis. Historians of Christianity will, I expect, question omissions of certain core figures in Canadian church history. I have attempted here to give a taste rather than a full serving of the spirit of Protestant doubt and skepticism so as to contextualize the current manifestation of skeptical thinking in contemporary progressive Christianity in Canada. My second chapter describes the communities featured in this study. In doing so, I explore notions of 'whiteness,' the 'middle-class' and 'suburban religiosity' as a means of investigating not only the religious worlds inhabited by progressive Christians but also their socio-economic, ethnic and cultural identities. In this chapter I have attended to the 'lived religion' of the participants of this study by focusing on the everyday experiences of progressive Christians in their ecclesiastical settings as they seek to create meanings and articulate their values and identities (Hall, ed. 1997; McGuire 2008; Bielo 2011a: 102).

The following chapters comprise the theoretical groundwork and ethnographic case studies. Chapter Three looks at the historical-critical bible studies conducted by progressive Christians. In this chapter, I suggest that progressive Christians telescope time in such a way that their focus on the historical Jesus and Christian origins takes precedence over other
periods of Christian history.\textsuperscript{29} I suggest that a progressive Christian textual ideology draws upon traditionally Protestant interactions with text and ways of being textual but does so by lending agency and authority to scholarly sources of biblical hermeneutics rather than the biblical text itself. This textual ideology results in an approach to scripture that both overly privileges and simultaneously rejects biblical authority. In many ways progressive Christians afford the bible the position of what Baudrillard (1994) calls a \textit{simulacrum} in that it is a faithful reproduction intentionally distorted as a means by which to provide an 'authentic' representation to the progressive Christian community. I show that in attempting to provide an accurate and authentic reading of the Jesus-story, progressive Christians whittle their narratives of origins to such a point where the original Jesus narrative as found in the Christian New Testament becomes virtually non-existent and inaccessible. I argue that ultimately they are haunted by their pasts—both their personal and collective ones.

My fourth chapter examines the ways in which progressive Christians understand their individual narratives as creating a shared experience with other progressive Christians. In this chapter I analyse the 'deconversion' narratives employed by progressive Christians as a way of making sense of their journey towards progressive Christianity. Through a process of thinking, conversing and debating, they have decided that a traditional Christian worldview, especially in regards to the authority of ecclesiastical structures and biblical canon, is both unempirical and immoral. However, the identity of Christian is one that

\textsuperscript{29} Telescoping time involves collapsing the past and the present to connect two separate and distant points in time. This process is common amongst religious communities that are engaged in a pursuit of origins. In this process, certain periods of time are ignored, glossed over, or generally forgotten. Doing so allows individuals and communities to selectively connect themselves to the past, or to connect themselves to a specific version of their past. An often sited example in Israelite historiography is the glossing over or forgetting of the exile, i.e., the events between the destruction of the temple and the return to Jerusalem to build the second temple (see Stott 2009: 41-58). Bielo offers as a Christian example the late eighteenth century, when restorationist theologies were especially popular amongst evangelicals in North America (see also Conkin 1997). This movement espoused a return to the practices and beliefs of first century Christianity. Bielo points to similar features among contemporary evangelicals (Bielo 2009a: 92).
progressive Christians seek to retain, albeit in non-religious manner. I argue that this alternative way of being Christian is partially enabled through the creation of a 'deconversion' narrative. While deconversion narratives, like conversion stories, involve a discussion of one's past actions and beliefs, I agree with linguistic anthropologist Peter Stromberg (1993) who contends that the performed conversion narrative's primary function is to sustain one's current position and status within a faith community.

My final chapter examines the rhetoric of the future employed by progressive Christians. I argue that their use of language is strangely eschatological in its presentation and imagines an ultimate eschatological end of collective atheism. I show that their use of eschatological linguistic tropes provides a way of situating themselves in the present while also offering a future-oriented language of the ideal.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was often struck by the ends to which the Christians I study sought to represent themselves as departing from or jettisoning an older, traditional, conservative variant of Christianity while simultaneously maintaining that theirs was a version of Christianity that was somehow, by comparison, purer or more authentic. Indeed, Jonathan Z. Smith's admonition, "what a difference, difference makes" (Smith 2004a) ran through my mind on many occasions. Initially, I looked for ways to reconcile these two competing claims of simultaneous novelty and antiquity, to expose their inequities and to convince whoever might listen that the tensions within the progressive Christian psyche demanded sorting out. In many ways, I was not alone in this quest as my fellow book study interlocutors sought similar resolution to these inherent tensions—albeit as adherents rather than as an anthropologist. Ultimately, I found the ease with which my subjects of study assumed and promoted contradictory worldviews to be most interesting. As the title of this
dissertation suggests, the moniker of heretic is one that they assume with pride: 'difference' does make a difference. I hope in turn that the content of this dissertation reveals that it is in the negotiation of differences—how they are imagined, consumed and represented—that one can begin to locate progressive Christianity.
Chapter 1 – Charting Skepticism:
The Historical Context and the Role of Doubt in Canadian Society

We live in times when the Christian religion is most powerfully and persistently assailed, by objections and theories which are in direct antagonism to its fundamental truths. . . . Doubt and disbelief are applauded as evidences of superior mental strength and intelligence; and faith in the doctrines of Christianity stigmatized, as a symptom of weakness and subserviency to priestly authority. And, what is still more surprising, within the Church itself, in many instances, the appointed expounders and defenders of religious truth have adopted and propagated theories that, at one time, would have been regarded as infidel speculations, utterly inconsistent with the historic faith of the Christian Church.


Since the United Church's beginning in 1925 there has been a steady regression from being evangelical to the prevailing ultra-liberalism that pervades our Theological Colleges. The result has been our dubious distinction of being the fastest declining denomination in North America! We have lost the Gospel we once faithfully proclaimed, and have forfeited our cornerstone as a Christian Church by abandoning Jesus' mandate for His Church in The Great Commission.

– Rev. Morley G. Clarke, "Jesus Wept" *Community of Concern Newsletter*, June 2010.30

I begin with two jeremiads. Two voices of opposition—132 years apart—which reflect a rich history of traditionalist antagonism and resistance to theological and dogmatic innovations and change. The first quote comes from an essay written in 1878 by the nineteenth-century Canadian Methodist clergyman, E. H. Dewart. From 1869 to 1894, Rev. Dewart was the editor of the Methodist journal the *Christian Guardian*, which was the

forerunner of the United Church of Canada's current periodical, *The Observer*. In the larger discussion from which this statement originates Dewart laments the state of disbelief that he sees running rampant in the general public and points out that some of the proponents of this disbelief are in fact clergy themselves.31 The second quote also presents itself as a lament over the current state of disbelief, in this instance, in the theological colleges of the United Church of Canada. This quote comes from an article written by the Reverend Morley G. Clarke,32 who is a retired minister and former incumbent at Metropolitan United Church in London, Ontario—one of Canada's largest and most theologically conservative United Churches. In this article, Clarke, who holds graduate degrees from the University of Toronto and Princeton Theological Seminary, writes about his opposition to the decision by his alma mater, Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto, to offer a certificate program in Muslim studies through its theology department.

I start with Dewart and Clarke because I want to spend some time with characters who stand in opposition to the tradition of liberal Protestantism in English Canada that is the focus of this study. I find it particularly insightful that both Dewart and Clarke specifically object to the very liberal Protestant tendency of privileging intellectual propositions and ideologies generated in and by institutions of higher learning. In Canada attempts to modernize Christianity have led to the adaptation of liberal Protestant theology in light of

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31 Dewart, a well-known moderate minister, published widely in the latter half of the nineteenth century. While he certainly espoused a conservative worldview, Dewart was not opposed to biblical criticism and advocated for employment of similar methods by those who sought to oppose the "scholarly infidels." "Truth is unchangeable," he wrote in 1879, "but human conceptions of truth are not" (see Gauvreau 1984: 327, 341). I should note, however, that Dewart was often criticised by his contemporaries for being too liberal because he defended the notion that doctrine could develop over time (Marshall 1992: 61-62).

32 Clarke also presented a version of this article in letter format to the principal and staff at Emmanuel College. In this letter Clarke outlines the graduate degrees and theological training he has received and his own history with the United Church of Canada (including his candidacy for Moderator of the United Church of Canada in 1988, a position which was assumed by Sang Chul Lee, the first Asian Moderator of the United Church of Canada). In both the article and the letter Clarke presents a point-form list of several misguided and, at times, bigoted "facts" about Muslims.
biblical higher criticism, sociology and popular understandings of evolutionary theory and scientific empiricism. More specifically, attempts by adherents to modernize the Christian narrative sought to bring it into conversation with Darwin’s theory of evolution and scholarly biblical hermeneutics, the latter of which contextualises and deconstructs Christian scriptures. In the eyes of many—but not all—historians of Canadian Christianity this adaptation to historical and scientific teachings resulted in an overall trend toward secularization. Likewise, in the eyes of many conservative clergy these attempts at adaptation have led to a movement away from Christian values undergirding a Christian society. For both historians and the authors of conservative jeremiads—such as Dewart and Clarke—the agency, or the blame, rests not on the general ebb and flow of modern society but rather on specific acts undertaken by members of the tradition—i.e., clergy and lay-leaders in the churches themselves.

In this introductory chapter, I propose to chart historical instances or moments of skepticism in English Canadian religion as an alternative to the dominant narrative of secularization. The concept of skepticism offers a dynamic way of understanding religious processes as processes—that is as something constructed and generated from within a religious tradition. I argue that this reading improves upon a focus on secularization, which is usually seen as an outside force imposed upon religion through cultural processes of differentiation and accommodation. Secularization emphasises the ‘weakening’ and ‘decline’ of religion, presenting secularity as a fait accompli, rather than examining instances of doubt, conflict and disarray as emerging out of and contributing to religious change. I argue that skepticism serves as a broader category and is an important framework for understanding the Canadian religious context as well as religion more generally. When contrasted with
secularization, skepticism provides deeper insights into the practices and worldviews of Canadian liberal Protestantism. In charting instances of skepticism, I seek to identify instances of skepticism—either individually or collectively—being understood and made palpable as an ethical stance, which I call 'the resolve to disbelieve'.

In focusing on skepticism over secularization, I do not intend to imply that I think that secularization has not occurred within the Canadian religious landscape. However, a more nuanced understanding of secularization points to a correlation of many different historical influences, from both inside and outside of institutional religion. Indeed as some scholars suggest, in many instances religious agents themselves were the authors of secularising tendencies (Marshall 1992: 17; Cook 1985: 5; Masters 1969: 27; cf. Smith 2003). Often this phenomenon occurred because of a re-evaluation of what it meant to be and to become a Christian (Clark 1996: 321). This being said, I maintain that the focus upon secularization does not allow for a complete picture of the ways in which religious agency is enacted.

In particular, the concept of secularization is not an adequate framework for capturing and comprehending the moments of religious inspiration that occurred alongside those larger discussions and debates undertaken within the Christian tradition in Canada that ultimately led to secularization. With its focus upon the reduced importance of religious practices and the waning of traditional religious beliefs, secularization implies that the religious dimensions of such discussions and debates are no longer relevant or identifiable. In contrast, I suggest that it is equally important to examine the instances in which certain practices and beliefs are jettisoned or challenged as examples of religious activity. By doing so, I address the power struggles for voice and authority as well as those moments of doubt and conflict that occur within faith communities, often with the significant participation of those
individuals whom Dewart and Clarke call the expounders and proponents of the tradition. For a religious adherent, no longer believing something, or believing against something, can be as profoundly religious as traditional assent to doctrinal tenets. For example, retired Episcopal priest, Jim Adams, the founder of the Centre for Progressive Christianity located in Washington, DC, explains in his book, *So You Think You're Not Religious - A Thinking Person's Guide to the Church* (1996), that the ability to believe in the Christian narrative and teachings was never meant to be assumed by all Christians. In Adams' view faith is merely one of the many gifts identified by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11, a gift which some Christians receive and others do not.\(^{33}\) As an aside, I note that for progressive Christians very few of these gifts are popular or of great significance. They certainly do not consider tongues or prophecy to be desirable gifts of the spirit; in fact, for many progressive Christians, faith is just as incredulous as these other gifts. Skepticism is not only about belief but is also about an ethics of belief, and the language used to construct and position belief, or a lack thereof, as part of the larger structure of Christianity. In exploring the rise of progressive Christianity, a movement that has very firmly understood itself and constructed its identity as that of the heretic and the skeptic, I seek to chart a historical trajectory within Canadian Protestantism.

This dissertation highlights the motivations and the spaces created for skepticism within contemporary Christianity, specifically among progressive Christians. In conversations and formal interviews with members of the five churches where I conducted fieldwork, I was often struck by the degree to which my interlocutors believed their experiences as heretics and skeptics to be novel. Indeed the title of my dissertation, *The New*
*Heretics*, acknowledges this perceived novelty. As outlined in my introduction, many of the progressive Christians with whom I spoke reported an acute sense of having been betrayed by the traditional church as an institution. They maintain that they have managed to resolve their sense of displacement within the Christian narrative through the new knowledge they have acquired via book study and discussion groups featuring progressive Christian thinkers and authors. For some encountering these texts and ideas facilitates a rejection of the biblical narrative as historically accurate and/or scientifically plausible, but for others it involves a rejection of Christian exclusivism in favour of inclusivity and pluralism, whereas others reported that they no longer believed in God and that they retain a Christian identity, despite self-identifying as atheists, agnostics or believers in exile.

Although the Christians I study indicate that their skepticism is a new experience, one can easily find examples that point to progressive Christianity as part of a larger story within the development of Protestantism in Canada. In exploring these contemporary and historical examples of skepticism it is important to note that they exist within the larger context of religious movements and changes that in some circumstances were in the direction of skepticism and at other points in the direction of increased religiosity. As Phyllis Airhart notes in her discussion of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Canadian Methodism, even in the midst of rapid change a crisis of faith does not always equate with a *loss* of belief. I agree with Airhart and suspect that historians of progressive Christianity may share her retrospective analysis and likewise conclude that "large-scale and seemingly abrupt ideological shifts" often do take place despite only "a slight modification of familiar patterns of thought" (Airhart 1992: 62).
In this chapter, I bring historiography into conversation with my contemporary sociological and anthropological analyses, in order to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Protestant liberalism. I begin with a discussion of secularization and skepticism, and then identify a number of figures who can be perceived as forerunners to progressive Christianity in Canada. In pointing to these figures I highlight the similarities between their stories and those captured in my fieldwork, which are featured throughout my dissertation. And while I do not claim any direct relation between the writings, stories and thoughts of these historical figures, I do suggest that they serve as guideposts in searching for a historical record. In doing so, I have selected specific figures who, while separated historically, most certainly worshipped in many of the same churches, sat in many of the same classrooms and raised many of the same questions as the progressive Christians featured in this study. For this reason, my discussion of the historical context of Canadian Protestantism focuses primarily on English-speaking figures based in Ontario, primarily in Toronto. My exploration of key intellectual figures from the Victorian area alongside popular figures from the mid-to-late twentieth century focuses on those historical periods that have been the most thoroughly studied by historians and scholars of religion. This approach differs from the methodology adopted in the rest of this dissertation, where I focus upon lay persons involved in discussions at a very different level of engagement.

This chapter is intended to lay the intellectual groundwork for what is going on "behind the scenes" in the ethnographic analysis featured in the second half of this dissertation. I have allowed my fieldwork to drive my analysis. Much like the progressive Christians I study, I have become fascinated by the search for historical precedents for their movement. While they have sought out figures, texts and traditions from the early church, I
have looked closer to home to find distinctly Canadian figures, texts and traditions for analysis. Furthermore, just as they have begun to see the decline and loss of certain religious beliefs and practices as a profoundly religious experience, so too have I sought to question some of the premises with which scholars of religion approach secularization. I do so by identifying skepticism, doubt and the act of not-believing as being as central to religious identity formation as more devout developments by individuals and communities. With this consideration in mind, I turn to a discussion of the reception of secularisation as a category among religious adherents and among scholars, and I do so by turning first to my ethnographic world.

Secularization as a scholarly and folk concept

It was one of those rainy, cold February evenings. The rain had pounded so hard against last week's snow fall that it had left deep dimples in the compacted snow, and the ground was a mixture of crater-like slush and salt from the roads. As usual I was running late for book study. Greenwich, Ontario is a bedroom community north of Toronto. Book study starts at 7:30pm but I have to leave my apartment downtown at 6pm and fight the massive exodus out of the city along the Don Valley Parkway in order to arrive on time. I hated showing up late to the St. Peter's book study group because it was a small group and they always waited until everyone arrived to begin the evening's discussion.

Fortunately the weather had impeded others too, and as I was entering the church building I met Linda, who was also frazzled from arriving late. I liked Linda a lot; she has

34 For example, Spong argues that just as Jesus is purported to have made a difficult sacrifice in the crucifixion, so too might progressive Christians see sacrificing certain beliefs as a profoundly religious act.

35 As noted in my introduction, I am using a pseudo-name for this community in order to protect the identity of both this church and the members of the book study.
kind eyes and a big heart. Linda was new to progressive Christianity and to liberal theology in general. She listened attentively when the other members of the group spoke and would hesitantly and humbly share her struggles with perceiving the non-theistic God advocated in Marcus Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity*. In comparison to the other members of the group, Linda’s more conservative theology sometimes seemed out of place among their liberal and radical voices, but they respected and honoured her place in the group. During one of the sessions when we were each asked to read our favourite scripture passages Linda chose to read from Psalm 23, and her eyes welled up with tears, almost immediately, as she began the well-known passage: “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want . . .”

We exchanged the usual greetings and she asked me about the course I was teaching. "What are your students reading this week?"

"We're reading about secularization theory," I told her. "There is a lot of debate about if, when, and how, secularization occurred in North America."

"Oh it's happening alright," she responded. "Just look at our church. We need to figure out what to do about it."

In response I explained that my students were reading Rodney Stark's well-known and often quoted article, "Secularization R.I.P." (1999), where Stark outlines that much of the data on secularization theory are not grounded in historical reality. Prophesies of secularization are rooted in the conviction that religion is not compatible with modernity and

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36 Other members of the group choose to read from more social-justice oriented passages: Jesus feeding the five thousand in Luke and the Sermon on the Mount from Mathew. One of the priests from the group chose a passage from Isaiah. My contribution, a favourite among liberal and progressive Christians, was Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." I discuss this session again in Chapter Three of my dissertation on reading practices. It is somewhat unique because it was a rare occasion during my fieldwork where we actually had a bible present and read from it. As noted in my introduction, St. Peter’s is somewhat of an anomaly in this study because the congregation is not officially a progressive congregation. The groups' choice to read Marcus Borg is perhaps indicative of this. Borg is considered by most progressive Christians to be more conservative than figures like Spong, Vosper or Crossan.
its related societal accruements, namely industrialization, urbanization, therapeutic ideologies, etc. Most interestingly, Stark points out that the "myth of past piety" (255) is not based on any historical data. According to Stark, there never was a golden "age of faith" from which the contemporary secular age has declined (see also Bryant 1993; Halman and Draulans 2006:265). He provides several, at times humorous, examples of the conduct at churches in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. Stark concludes his article by pointing out that secularization theory focuses too much on affiliation, and not enough on personal beliefs, and confuses religious change with secularization (269; cf. Bruce 2001).

After two years of extensive fieldwork at five churches, the question "is secularization occurring?" seems out of place. Regardless of scholarly constructions and debates concerning the secularization thesis (see Bruce 1992 for an excellent overview of many of these debates), my research reveals that according to many mainline liberal Protestants, the issue is not if, when and how secularization is occurring, but rather is one of if, when and how the church should respond. Linda's assertion that secularization is happening and that Christians need to figure out what to do about it resonates with many members of liberal Protestant communities.

37 Stark argues we should not be surprised by the fact that religious services were not frequently attended by the masses because "going to church in, say, the fifteenth century, required the average person to stand in an unheated building to hear a service which was conducted entirely in incomprehensible Latin by priests who may indeed not have been speaking Latin at all, but many of whom were simply mumbling nonsense syllables" (257). He also shows that most clergy were illiterate and unable to identify the author of the Lord's prayer and that when people did attend churches during this supposed golden age, "members of the population jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep, and even let off guns" (Thomas in Stark 1999: 258). However, one could argue that even though religious services were not frequently attended and the clergy, let alone their parishioners, were not well-versed in theological doctrines, there was an almost universal level of belief in God, as well as other spirits and folk traditions (see Delumeau 1977: 154-74).

With all of this being said, Stark's article is not without problems. As a sociologist, his reliance on historical data is selective to further his point. His article is helpful, however, in introducing the idea that much of the novelty we assign to supposed trends and religious beliefs identified as 'modern' is in fact anachronistic.
In this chapter I make two seemingly contradictory, but nevertheless related, assertions about religion in Canada. First, despite the many arguments against the secularization thesis worldwide, in a solely Canadian context we can say not only that secularization has occurred but that it occurred at least in part because of actions taken and beliefs held by evangelical and liberal Protestants from the Victorian era onwards (cf. Smith 2003). Second, as noted above, I argue that the study of the 'secularization' of Canadian society does not provide enough detail for scholars seeking to understand the specific paths taken by liberal Protestants and others in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century context. Far too often discussions of secularization in Canada and elsewhere become enveloped in a comparative analysis of number and survey results in which individuals are asked to list their religious affiliations, practices and beliefs.

Furthermore, discussions of secularization frequently mirror a biblical teleology in that they are directed towards the end of religion. In doing so, secularization theories often promote a progressivist and evolutionary construction of religion, specifically Christianity (see Dumont 1982; Weber 1958; Berger 1967, 1973). Indeed, the secularization thesis is often so readily accepted by progressive Christians and other mainline Protestants, like Linda, precisely because it is the logical end of their reformatory and progressive era theological roots. While they have not necessarily read their works, many progressive Christians follow many nineteenth- and twentieth-century sociologists in anticipating a future without organized religion. This future is presented as an ideal one in which religious agents are able to escape from a form of religiosity that is labelled 'backwards', 'superstitious' or 'reactionary' (cf. Zwissler 2007: 63). When progressive Christians call for a "new Reformation" in many ways this is in reference to a reformation that swells up and out of the
prominence of 'secularization theory' in their discourses, and is directed at the current and ideal states of religion in Canada.

In arguing against secularization, Stark points to the work of Grace Davie (1990; 1994), who contends that decline of church membership must be viewed in the context of declining membership at all levels of society, including trade unions, political parties, educational groups and other voluntary associations. When examining the statistics alone, Davie points out that "the churches are as successful . . . as many of their secular equivalents . . . far more people attended church than league football games in 1999" (Davie 2001: 106; see also Putnam 1995; 2000). She has coined the term "believing without belonging," which describes the strong religious sentiment that remains, despite decreasing attendance. According to Davie, "the crucial point to grasp is that some sort of religiosity persists despite the obvious drop in practice" (1994: 43). Thus, for Davie, the reliance upon attendance numbers alone does not support the assertion of secularization being a measure of religious belief.38

Bryan Wilson, once a prominent champion of the 'secularization thesis' (1966; 1974; 1976), has more recently emphasised that secularization is not as all encompassing as he and other secularization theorists previously thought (1998; 2001; 2003). Wilson argues that secularization consists primarily of three factors: the changing locus of authority, the changing character of knowledge, and the growing demands of rational principles. In sum, he explained that it is not the age that is secular but rather it is the structure of modern society. For Wilson, secularization is evident not because of any perceived decline of religious belief,

38 It should be noted that Davie does not explicitly define what she means by belief in her early work on the topic. Later critiques point out that "the only form of believing without belonging that is as pervasive as Davie suggests is a vague willingness to suppose that 'there's something out there', accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be" (Voas and Crockett 2005: 24-25).
but because of the **pronounced decline in the significance** that is attributed to religious belief. In his view, individuals may still claim to believe tenets of their religious tradition but the ways in which these tenets have any meaningful effect upon their lives is limited. This limited effect likewise is credited to the larger manifestation of secularization in public life.

Wilson's term **significance** contributes to a third venue that may be used to comprehend contemporary religiosity; namely, an examination of the ways in which an adherent fails to attend to the normative practices and beliefs of their tradition. The above discussion debates the role of belief and activity (attendance) in determining the quality of being religious, but fails to examine the ways in which individuals might understand themselves as belonging to a tradition apart from specific beliefs and practices (see Day 2011). For example, David Voas explains that "neither belief nor practice, however, necessarily coincides with the personal sense of being Anglican or Catholic or Muslim or Jewish" (2003: 94). He asserts that unlike membership in a voluntary society, one's religious affiliation does not necessarily expire with lapses in participation or subscription: "religion for the present is still capable of being an aspect of personal identity that does not depend on active involvement, official membership or even agreement with basic doctrine" (94).39

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39 To delineate this point, Voas demonstrates that belief does not necessarily coincide with lived experience. He points to a survey composed by Gill, Hadaway and Marler (1998), whose data revealed that a quarter of respondents claimed to believe in reincarnation, a half in clairvoyance, a quarter in horoscopes and one third in ghosts (cf. Zuckerman 2008). Focusing on the UK, they drew evidence from over one hundred surveys ranging from 1926 to the late 1990s. For each time period a minimum of two surveys, and in some instances ten surveys, were employed and weighted in proportion to the size of the samples used (508). The survey further revealed that there has been a marked decrease in traditional beliefs including the following: belief in God (down from 79 percent in the 1960s to 68 percent in the 1990s) and belief in the afterlife (down from 49 percent in the 1940s/1950s to 37 percent in the 1970s with a slight rebound in the 1980s and 1990s). Most importantly, Gill, Hadaway and Marler's research reveals that not only has there been a significant erosion of belief in God, but also there has been a serious decline in belief in a personal God and in Jesus as the Son of God, as well as teachings about the afterlife and the bible (514). Those professing belief in a personal God declined by 12 percent from 43 percent in 1940s/1950s to 31 percent in the 1990s (509). Of special interest to this chapter is the fact that Gill et. al report that belief in Jesus as "the Son of God" declined from 68 percent in 1940s/1950s to 49 percent in the 1980s; those responding that Jesus was "just a man" or "just a story" increased from 18 percent to 38 percent over the same period (510).
In order to offer an example, Voas turns to Wayne Spencer’s discussion of astrology to show that even astrology is characterised by its practical orientation but rarely has any actual effect upon its devotees’ actions (Voas 2003: 96).40 Spencer (2003) himself concludes that "astrological belief is broad but shallow," and although it will maintain a place of prominence in private life, its sphere of influence as a serious initiative will remain so for only a small number of adherents (224-5). Voas, playing upon Davie’s phrase 'believing without belonging,' classifies this phenomenon as 'believing without believing' and describes it as a state in which "views are uninformed, not deeply held, seldom acted upon, and relatively volatile." He goes on to explain that "people may feel that on certain matters they are required to hold and even express opinions, but that is not the same as finding those issues particularly important" (96). Voas’ work clearly exemplifies that belief is not necessarily a reliable measure of one's identity (religious or otherwise). In conjunction with this phenomenon, Voas is quick to point out that one's statement of belonging to an institution is likewise not necessarily an accurate indicator of religiosity. Once again working off of Davie, Voas terms this trend 'believing without belonging' (99).

Following along the same lines as Voas, Canadian historian David Marshall observes that secularization is not meant to be perceived as a linear process of decline. In other words, scholars should not focus on the abandonment of beliefs but rather on the importance of the roles beliefs—such as in the existence of God, the resurrection, the reality of an afterlife—have for both individuals and society in general. Marshall specifies that, on one level, accompanying secularization is an observable increase in "reservations, qualifications and doubts" concerning religious tenets that to some degree have led to "indifference or lack of

40 Astrology here is considered as having a "practical orientation" because it is concerned primarily with one's day-to-day actions rather than with a system of ethics or ritual activities.
religious observance and practice." Never meant to imply the complete dissolution of religion, secularization should be read as the weakening of the role of religion for both individuals and the collective (Marshall 1994: 60).

In their groundbreaking work on atheist Anglican youth, Leslie Francis and Mandy Robbins (2004) attempt to clarify Davie's categories by offering a mode of religiosity that consists of either 'belonging without believing' or 'believing without practising' (2004: 38). 'Belonging,' according to Francis and Robbins, pertains to a state of being rather than a specific activity or participation within a set of activities. Individuals, they argue, position themselves as members of ethnic groups and families, whether or not they are active within a specific community. Francis and Robbins show that self-assigned religious affiliation or self-identified religious belonging must be seriously considered as an alternative category in measuring religiosity. Drawing upon Bouma's (1992) sociological theory of religious identification, Francis and Robbins maintain that religious affiliation might serve as a useful social category with which to identify an individual's "cultural background" and to determine the "general orientating values" of a person. Bouma draws from the work of Peter Berger in seeing religious affiliations as one of the multiple determinates that compose 'meaning systems' and 'plausibility structures' (Francis and Robbins 2004: 41; cf. Bouma 1992: 106-107; Berger 1967). Francis and Robbins' work rejects belief in God as an 'orienting value' necessary for religious affiliation. The freedom with which their young male participants identified themselves as both atheists and Anglicans suggests that they likewise do not necessarily see theism as a prerequisite for affiliation.41

41 Francis and Robbins employed a survey that included 33,982 thirteen to fifteen year-olds. Out of this sample, their research compared 6,647 males who self-identified as neither belonging nor believing to 2,168 males who self-identified as belonging to the Anglican Church (either the Church of England, Church in Wales or Anglican) while simultaneously rejecting belief in God (2004: 44). The research conducted and terms proposed
The above discussions come out of British sociological sources, where more extensive survey work has been conducted and where likewise a more pronounced decline in religious attendance and affiliation has been noted. The clever word play employed by these scholars—believing without belonging, belonging without believing, believing without believing, etc.—points to the prevalence with which adherence and assent determine categorization as a religious agent. But from the Canadian perspective something is missing from this assessment. As a leading sociologist of Canadian religious trends, Reginald Bibby has observed over his thirty-plus years of surveying Canadians that, unlike in the United States, many Canadians continue to identify with and retain the denominational affiliation with which they were raised, even if they are not actively involved in that denomination or affirm its doctrines (Bibby 1987). He notes that many who come from mainline churches are content with their denominational label and have no desire to be more invested in an actual church community and its practices. For example, in Bibby's research on inactive Anglicans he determined that many non-practicing and non-participating Anglicans understand themselves to be Anglicans, and asking them if they would like to be more actively involved in the community is analogous to asking someone if they would prefer to eat five meals a day rather than three—to which most healthy humans would presumably reply that they are content with three (1987: 135; cf. Zwissler 2007: 57). In the same way, while they very well understand themselves as Anglicans—or Presbyterians, or members of the United Church Canada—to actually attend church services or engage in theological matters seems excessive.

by Francis and Robbins are interesting and apt for my research on progressive Christians who, like the teenagers in their study, also claim the affiliation but not the traditional beliefs associated with being Christian. I am hesitant, however, to use their research too strongly in bolstering my own studies because I suspect that their finding might reveal more about the contradictions in and complexity of the fifteen-year-old male psyche than they do about religious activities and beliefs in the contemporary world.
Having outlined some scholarly debates on the current state of religion and related discussions of the secularization thesis, I return to my previous assertion that a discussion of skepticism serves as an ideal venue in which to understand both historical and contemporary religiosity on the part of mainline liberal Protestants in Canada, the tradition out of which progressive Christianity emerges and which it calls its institutional home. As noted in my introduction, I offer this historical discussion somewhat hesitantly because although I am eager to participate in the lively discussions that animate the scholarly study of Canadian church history, I am aware of the dangers of entering into these conversations in one brief chapter. Thus I have been forced to be selective in my presentation and analysis of the data. Regardless, this discussion is necessary, because of the tendency of progressive Christians to see themselves as part of an innovative and new movement.\textsuperscript{42} As this dissertation reveals, when progressive Christians turn towards the past, they do so to engage with early Christianity in order to access what they deem to be a more authentic and purer version of the Christian narrative.\textsuperscript{43} With this in mind, I offer this chapter not only as a chart of skepticism but also as a means of surveying a few of the key historical figures who might be identified as forerunners to progressive Christianity.

\textsuperscript{42} In fact, progressive Christians would find great affinity with the progressivist teachings of certain Canadian Methodist leaders at the turn of the twentieth century whose new ideals of social transformation and 'sacrificial service' evolved in part as a response to conservative social teachings of fundamentalism and premillennialism that focused on personal conversion and holiness (see Airhart 1992; 1990a; see also Christie and Gauvreau 1996).

\textsuperscript{43} Less frequently progressive Christians express interest in the mystics of the medieval era. One notable exception are the popular writings of Diana Butler Bass, who offers historical and contemporary analyses of American Christianity, focusing on liberal Protestantism and attempting to proffer 'the other side of the story' when it comes to American religious history. Bass completed a PhD at Duke University in 1991 and studied under the guidance of church historian George Marsden. She is a recognised leader and popular speaker in progressive Christian circles in the United States. While none of the communities in which I conducted ethnography were reading her works in a collective setting, they were somewhat aware of Bass's texts.
Canadian Concerns

The story of Protestantism in Canada mirrors larger themes of Canadian history. Canadian Protestantism has been defined by regionalism, international politics and a relatively peaceful transition from colonialism to sovereignty. Religiosity, especially Protestantism in English-speaking Canada, has raised banners of ecumenism, social gospel, secularization and multiculturalism. In each generation religious leaders, scholars and public figures have asked themselves ‘what is the role of religion in the public sphere?’ and more interestingly, ‘what is distinctively Canadian about religion's presence in Canadian public life?’ In addressing these questions some scholars argue that Canada differs most dramatically from the United States and Britain in the sphere of religion (Beyer 2006; Noll 2006; Lyon and Van Die 2000; Reimer 1995; Stahl 2007). In many ways, Canada, not the United States or Britain, represents a society in which the religious dreams of social gospel reformers were realised, albeit at the expense of institutional Christianity.

In identifying Canada as a secular nation many theorists, as I have noted, point toward a lack of participation in religious communities and regular attendance at religious services, as well as a diminished role of religion in public life, in comparison to American manifestations of religion in the public sphere. Many scholars call attention to a decline in

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45 One of Canada's greatest prides, universal health care, emerged out of the works of socialist Christians such as Methodist minister J. S. Woodsworth and Baptist minister Tommy Douglas. Both Woodsworth and Douglas were leaders in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) political party and were committed to social gospel teachings in advocating their socialist stance. The New Democratic Party of Canada, currently the official opposition party, descends from the CCF and identifies both Douglas and Woodsworth as important forefathers (see Cook 1985: 196-227; McLeod and McLeod 2004).

46 Exceptions to this observation are multiple. As in the 2002 case of a young Sikh man in Quebec who desired to wear his Kirpan while attending a public high school. The school initially forbid him to carry the ceremonial dagger, citing that it was a breach of the schools 'no weapon' policy, but the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Kirpan as a religious object was permissible. During the 2007 Ontario provincial elections, a controversial suggestion by John Tory's Conservative Party that they would extend public funding to religious schools...
religious beliefs and practices (Bibby 1993; Rawlyk 1996), as well as a transformation of institutional religion, both at the national (Lyon and Van Die 2000) and global levels (Beyer 1994), in order to account for the secularization of society. Other scholars, however, suggest that religious practices are in fact increasing. For instance, Peter Emberley (2002) maintains that religion has been rearranged in Canada in such a way that "the margin is moving into the mainstream, as historical fragments believed to have been left behind are suddenly being reassessed and reactivated" (2002: 13). This quandary is further confounded by the demographic facts that eighty percent of Canadians self-identify with religious groups (Stahl 2007: 59)—often maintaining the same religious affiliation throughout their lifetime (see Bibby 1997; 2002: 35)—and that belief in God and private religious practices are widespread (Stahl 2007: 59; Clark and Schellenberg 2006). While the numbers of individuals attending religious institutions is low, theories of secularization often overlook the significance that individuals place upon other religious activity.\textsuperscript{47} Statistical data reveals that forty-four percent of Canadians place a high degree of value on religion as playing an important role in their lives (Clark and Schellenberg 2006: 4). At the same time, 'religious nones' have increased from one percent in 1961 to sixteen percent in 2001 and now stand as the highest dominated the election campaign and media coverage. A further example is provided by recent legal and public debates concerning the practices of plural marriage, or polygamy, by a group of Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints living in Bountiful, British Columbia. In each instance, however, one could argue that the reason that these events received such widespread media coverage, and were, such divisive topics of national debate, is that the presence of religion in the public sphere is not considered to be status quo but rather necessitates political and national regulation, as was the conclusion of the Bouchard-Taylor Report 2008.

\textsuperscript{47} Commenting upon the decline of weekly attendance at services, historians of Canadian religion Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (2010: 93) point out that in 1946 the percentage of Canadians who attended church weekly was 67 percent—a figure that was much higher than Western Europe and the United States. Weekly attendance rates have declined steadily from that point on: from fifty-five percent (1965) to thirty-five percent (1985). In 2001, weekly attendance at Canadian churches stood at 20 percent, a figure that is much lower than American rates and not significantly higher than those of the United Kingdom. Despite this observable decline, Christie and Gauvreau argue that religion is somewhat on the rise. They use the example of the election of the current Conservative Party Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, who is a neo-evangelical and led Canada's longest standing minority government to victory in both the 2004 and 2006 federal elections before winning a majority government in May 2011.
affiliation in Canada, above the United Church of Canada, which is Canada's largest Protestant church (Christie and Gauvreau 2010: 93).

In assessing the decline in church attendance and the increase in religious nones, atheists and agnostics, it is easy to paint a picture of a mass exodus out of the established church and a secular and public encroachment upon those realms of society where religion had previously played a central role (i.e., education, health care, civic and domestic realms, etc.). Maintaining this narrative of institutional decline is, in many ways, dependent on an emphasis on official versions of religion at the expense of what we might call popular or lived religious traditions. Cassanova's definition of secularization is helpful here as he points to “a process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere” (Casanova 1994:19). Cassanova's point concerning the creation of a new and specialized religious sphere allows for a more nuanced perspective of what is occurring at both institutional and popular levels.

Arguing against the secularization thesis, Nancy Christie and Michel Gauvreau show that "religion can undergo institutional decline or even failure without having secularization, as long as personal belief remains at the centre of everyday life—even if it no longer resides robustly within the realm of public discourse" (2010: 95). Indeed, the prevalence of religious themes and motifs in popular culture—such as films, music, or online communities—as well

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48 This number includes atheists, agnostics and nones. Discussing the statistical data concerning atheists, agnostics and nones during the first decade of the twentieth century, Marshall (1992) extrapolates that an increase in these numbers is probably more indicative of changes in social attitudes than a sudden conversion to atheism or agnosticism: "perhaps people who had been quietly harbouring secularist ideas were more willing to confess their unorthodox position" (Marshall 1992: 11, cf. Budd 1977). Additionally, the number may stem from an increased number of immigrants to Canada, such as those within the Chinese Canadian population, who do not necessarily self-identify as religious (see Lai, Paper and Paper 2005; Beyer 2005: 238).
as the continued importance of religion as a global phenomenon contradicts prevailing views on secularization.

Drawing upon Christie and Gauvreau's thesis, I suggest that it is helpful to look not only at the way that belief remains at the centre of everyday life, but also at the way that disbelief occupies a primary position in the contemporary world, as well as in historical examples. The rise of the popularity of the so-called 'new atheists' is one prominent example (see Beattie 2007). Many of their critics in popular media have argued that the new atheists are equally as 'fundamentalist' in their representations of and discourses on religion as the conservatives whom they denounce. In doing so, the new atheists create a space that privileges disbelief and attends to the proselytization of those who are sympathetic to religious modalities. Regardless of the fact that they vehemently dismiss religion and its many accruements, the new atheists can and should be situated within contemporary religious discourses and religious identity politics. Again, I insist that as scholars of religion we should seek to explore the dismissal of religious beliefs and practices as a primary means through which individuals and communities come to express their religious identities.

In many ways, liberal Protestantism in Canada is informed by progressive era tropes and themes. Thus, Canadian Protestantism situates itself as a tradition which is moving towards something better but with a focus on 'this worldly' concerns. Marshall (1992) notes that in attempting to delineate a "preachable gospel," which would appeal to an increasingly consumer-based and modern culture, many ministers and clergy eased their previously held membership standards and substituted this-worldly themes for the supernatural in their sermons (1992: 4-5; cf. Bryant 1993). In fact, beginning in the nineteenth century, some liberal Protestants sought to diminish focuses on the supernatural in favour of an emphasis
upon a universal Christian ethic. As such, much of the secularization that occurred within Canadian churches is rooted in nineteenth-century ideologies that espoused both material and social progress as their organizing philosophy (Stahl 2007).

With this in mind, the story of liberal Protestantism is also one that relates a story of loss through success. As church historians have revealed, liberal Protestants in Canada were so successful in making the key features and core concerns of their social gospel and progressivist teachings available to all of society that they did so at the expense of public perceptions of the church as relevant. For many scholars this has meant that the social gospel, which posited a Christian imperative to bring about the Kingdom of God through educational, health and welfare reform, was the primary impetus for the ultimate secularization of Canadian society (see Allen 2008; McKillop 1979; Cook 1985 and Westfall 1989). Part of the concern of the social gospel was to place an emphasis on what was deemed to be the societal relevance of Christianity, which for Christians was a focus on alleviating the social problems that accompanied urban expansion in an increasing industrial society (Ahlstrom 1967: 74-7; see also Curtis 1991). Salvation in this scheme is derived from a social world, that is, from one's own actions and the actions of others in the world. Whereas in the past certain individuals or their actions might be categorized as 'sinful', the social gospel taught that this sinfulness was a by-product of circumstances associated with poverty and the other accruements of a capitalist society. With this in mind, the imperative is upon the church "by the virtue of man's endeavour and God's regenerating power" to transform the world into the kingdom of God as described by Jesus in the New Testament (Mathews 1897: 229; McLoughlin 1978).

49 For others this notion of universality depended upon a version of the supernatural (see Klassen 2011).
In order to bring about this new Kingdom of God many clergy and lay-leaders within the Protestant churches advocated for the establishment of social agencies and other institutions. Christie and Gauvreau (1996) explain that "progressive clergymen had achieved their aim of converting provincial and federal governments to the principle of providing social security" by the 1930s (1996: 248-49). According to many historians, especially in the Canadian context, the social gospel was accompanied by an increased focus—both inside and outside theological circles—upon sociology rather than theology (Gauvreau 1991; Cook 1985: 4; McKillop 1979: 224-28; cf. Smith 2003). Ramsay Cook (1985), for example, offers a cast of eccentric figures whom he claims signify the shift in late Victorian English Canadian society from a religious worldview to a social scientific one. In examining a somewhat unconventional group of politicians, scientists, theologians, journalists, educators and beekeepers, Cook explores the transformation of religious discourse from a focus upon individual salvation to social regeneration. In light of religious crises brought about by Darwinian evolution and biblical historical criticism, many prominent figures in English Canada attempted "to salvage Christianity by transforming it into an essentially social religion" (1985: 4). In this schema, traditional Christian notions of individual salvation were replaced with social salvation; humanity's relationship with God was underemphasised and the focus shifted, for adherents of this social gospel, to constructing healthy and moral relationships between humans. According to Cook, liberal Christians promoted secularization "by emphasising social unity and downplaying doctrine" (1985: 5). More specifically, he

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50 For example, in 1893 at the Queen’s Theological Alumni Conference, papers focused on biblical criticism as well as on social problems such as poverty, taxes and social evolution. The following year, the Methodist General Conference initiated a committee with the mandate to examine "Sociological Questions." The report of this committee concluded that, "when Society has become impregnated with the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, trusts, monopolies, heartless combinations and oppressed conditions shall have been superseded by a universal brotherhood" (Riddell 1946: 211-212; see also Masters 1969: 31).
argues that the social gospel movement in Canada contributed to an overall perspective in which the church was understood as irrelevant and other social institutions were promoted as better equipped to handle the challenges of regenerating society.\footnote{Cook has been rightly criticized by church historians for over-emphasising the radical regenerators of late Canadian Victorian society. By focusing on overly eccentric and elite individuals, Cook fails to account for the lived experiences of the majority. Robert T. Handy asserts that while Cook's work is an "important chapter in North American religious, social and intellectual history" it fails to really account for "the inner complexity of the [social gospel] movement," which possessed both moderate and conservative divisions (Handy 1987: 387).}

Likewise, William Westfall (1989) argues that in the mid-nineteenth century the Protestant consensus in Ontario adopted a survival method of accommodation to secular visions of material progress, which ultimately led to its decreasing overall relevance (see also Hubert 1991: 184). Relevance, however, is a difficult feature to measure. For historians and sociologists relevance is often measured by involvement in a particular movement or organization.

**Proto-Progressives: Seeking the Skeptics in Days Gone By**

The initial experiences of Europeans in North America, especially interactions with indigenous peoples, prompted questions about the origins of religious beliefs (Boyarin 2009). As the wife of an Anglican army chaplain, Frances Brooke, renowned as 'Canada's first novelist', had plenty of opportunity to reflect on the religious practices of the nearby Iroquois peoples. In her epistolary novel, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), Brooke's protagonist, Arabella Fermor, uses these interactions, along with mounting tensions in British-occupied Quebec, as a springboard to more universalistic thinking about the nature of God and religion:

Emily and I have been talking religion all the way home: we are both mighty good girls, as girls go in these degenerate days; our grandmothers to be sure—but it's folly to look back.
We have been saying, Lucy, that 'tis the strangest thing in the world people should quarrel about religion, since we undoubtedly all mean the same thing; all good minds in every religion aim at pleasing the Supreme Being; the means we take differ according to the country where we are born and the prejudices we imbibe from education; a consideration which ought to inspire us with kindness and indulgences to each other (1769: 223-224).

In pointing to the similarities between the different religious traditions and in positing a common Supreme Being, Arabella Fermor is representative of the experiential or empirical approach that was common among Enlightenment advocates of natural theology. Indeed Arabella assumes that other religious traditions share her Christian orientation towards both believing in and desiring to please God and concludes that such a common spiritual and ethical orientation justifies equal treatment and courtesy between various traditions. In making this argument, Arabella further assumes that members of other religious communities distinguish between belief as an intellectual premise and the desire to please as an emotional or psychological response. Read through the lens of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the twentieth century, Arabella's pluralism seems out of place with the fictional protagonist created by the wife of an army chaplain, but when considered alongside her contemporaries—John Locke, David Hume, Thomas Paine and Alexander Pope—Arabella's deism is in keeping with the theological tenor of the times, which espoused the ideals of individualism, social equality and democracy (Christie 1990: 11; Masters 1969: 28; see also Hatch 1989).

James Turner (1985) discusses the general assumption of historians that it was uncommon for people to adopt atheism or agnosticism as their religious outlook prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. While some certainly adopted such perspectives earlier, 'unbelief' was not really a viable option until the Victorian age, when the 'crisis of faith' initiated by critical studies of the bible, science and other technological advancements
enabled it (Turner 1985: xii-xiii). Along the same lines Marshall explains that in many ways "it is more accurate to describe the Victorian age in Canada as one of much serious thought and debate about religion rather than one of unquestioning faith and great piety" (1992: 25). Marshall argues that it was the religious communities themselves that were responsible for facilitating a conversation about religion that opened up a space for disbelief. Following from this premise, it is advantageous to look to a reconstitution of what it means to believe—which has traditionally assumed the primary space of religious affiliation in contemporary Protestantism—as well as what it means to be a moral agent, which is, again, an important contribution to contemporary constructions of the Protestant subject.

According to Turner, the roots of disbelief, or unbelief, are attributable to evangelical manifestations of Christianity. While certainly not the only driving force behind disbelief, Turner writes that "evangelicalism neither rejected nor simply perpetrated the legacy of the Enlightenment" (1985: 76). Instead, they replicated the Enlightenment rendering of religion, which placed morality and belief at the centre of religion by focusing upon those essentializing elements of the human character that could be evaluated as either moral or immoral. Attention to self-control—temperance, abstinence, use of language, etc.—encouraged an understanding of the Christian self as under-construction or in a continuous state of transforming. The Wesleyan doctrine of Christian Perfection, for example, which was adopted by the Canadian Methodist Church in the nineteenth century, further inscribed a conception of the Christian self as fluid. This doctrine required believers to constantly re-evaluate their piety and placed them in a state of frequent crisis and re-creation (Marshall 1992: 33; for a discussion of Canadian interpretations of Christian Perfectionism see Van Die 1989: 78-88). In doing so, belief became the primary means through which religious agency
was enacted and furthermore was represented as something that can be critically evaluated as either 'good' or 'bad' and 'true' or 'false'.

The Canadian intellectual scene in the nineteenth century was dominated by the followers of Thomas Reid's 'common sense' philosophy, which was based on an epistemology of rational intuitivism and assumed that certain traits and principles of the mind, such as morality, were innate in all humans. It promoted the idea that any investigation into the natural world was inherently theological, leading the investigator to discover "the wondrous handiwork of God" (McKillop 1979: 23; see also Turner 1985: 65). The attraction of Reid's common sense philosophy was that it enabled one to ascertain that external realities about the world were observable as facts. When applied to biblical texts it encouraged a literalist reading of scripture (Gauvreau 1990: 70; see also Keane 2007: 63; Crapanzano 2000), but when applied to Christian practices it presupposed the possibility of gauging one's identity as a Christian, according to what an individual says or does—usually measured according to what an adherent herself claims to believe.

When attempting to understand the Victorian religious mindset, Richard Allen argues that the contemporary reader needs to remember that terms like 'liberal' and 'evangelical' were not considered polarized opposites in the mid-Victorian era as they are today (Allen 2008: xx). Indeed, these terms are not detached from the delineation of 'liberal' and 'modernist' theologies until the late-Victorian period. Allen points to Dorrien's work to show that liberal theology during this time period should not be seen as having abandoned core elements of the Christian narrative, such as sin, salvation, revelation, justification, millennialism, atonement, and the centrality of Jesus (2008: xxii). Unlike the German seminaries, where liberal theology went hand-in-hand with the universities and elite
philosophers, North American liberal theology was extrapolated from the individual experiences of clergy and laity.

Faced with new ideas about the biblical narrative, evolutionary and geological sciences, individualism, and humanism, clergy in the nineteenth century promoted progressive religiosity and social agendas, in part, to obtain relevancy for the church.\(^{52}\) Indeed, in many ways the late nineteenth century stands as a time in which the same questions raised by the progressive Christians featured in this study first find mainstream appeal as liberal Protestants sought to reconcile the Christian narrative with history, science and the desire for social amelioration (Masters 1969: 31). At that time, liberal and evangelical Protestant clergy struggled to make sense of certain elements of the Christian narrative and often encountered a backlash from their denominational hierarchies. In what follows, I focus on three such instances in which clergy attempted to challenge traditional viewpoints on Christian social progress (Anglican, W. S. Rainsford), their denomination's doctrines (Presbyterian, D. J. Macdonnell) and the historical accuracy of scripture (Methodist, George C. Workman). While numerous additional examples abound from the Victorian era and beyond, I limit myself, for the sake of space, to three. Additionally, I will endeavour to make a similar comparison using more current examples in the latter part of this chapter by looking at Charles Templeton, Tom Harpur and Gretta Vosper. While Harpur and Vosper and perhaps even Templeton to a certain extent can be identified as instigators of the development of progressive Christianity in Canada, I am not suggesting that the other figures featured here are directly related. It should additionally be noted for those unfamiliar with

\(^{52}\) For example, the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), along with *Essays and Reviews* (1860), which is a collection of articles written by a group of British clergy and scholars who introduced German biblical higher criticism to the general public, served as major publications promoting skepticism on the part of both clergy and laity (see Masters 1969:28).
Canadian religious history that the progressive Christian movement featured in this dissertation should not be confused with other uses of the locution 'progressive Christianity'. In adopting the term 'progressive' the Christians I study articulate a theology which upholds their conceptions of intellectual integrity in light of modern science and contemporary liberal morality. Theirs is a theology that attends to concerns of secularism and modernity and should not be confused with the progressive Christianity of the social gospel movement at the turn of the twentieth century nor with John Cobb's use of the term in relation to process theology, although they do share many of the this-worldly focuses and intellectual propositions of both of these movements.

William Stephen Rainsford

But the light spreads: that is the nature of light; and the truth grows a little less dim: that is the nature of truth; and the number of men of "good will" is increasing in our old world. And so approaches a better day, when we shall be judged to have failed or succeeded in our life's task, in so far as we have failed or succeeded in revealing a reasonable, a ruling, and a lovable God to those around us. . . . Once the Church led men to the light. To-day, too commonly, there is more darkness in the Church than in the world she claims to lead and save.


Historian Ramsay Cook maintains that the story of Reverend Dr. W. S. Rainsford epitomizes the journey taken by Canadian Protestantism in the late Victorian age (1985:23-24). Cook's description of Rainsford is apt in that over the lifetime of his ministry he swung like a pendulum from evangelical enthusiasms to a liberal-modernist focus on the humanness, rather than the divinity, of Jesus. For example, in two decades Rainsford went from standing as a voice of evangelical opposition to worldly activities—going so far as to denounce the 'divine' Miss Sarah Bernhardt's stage performances at the Grand Opera House
in Toronto in 1881—} to ultimately disparaging the early Christian apostles for misinterpreting Jesus' teachings regarding hell and the second coming in a sermon delivered to St. George's Episcopal Church, New York, in 1900.

Though he attended Cambridge, Rainsford did not consider himself to be a scholar. While there he studied under the theologian Joseph Barber Lightfoot, who, despite his conservative leanings, urged Rainsford to apply historical criticism to the teachings of Paul in the New Testament. In his teachings, Lightfoot rejected the verbal inspiration of biblical text and apostolic succession as a historical phenomenon. Ultimately, Rainsford recounts, Lightfoot argued that religious doctrines should be approached as evolutionary, in that they were subject to and influenced by contemporary thinking (Rainsford 1922: 116). While he did not initially adopt Lightfoot's views, Rainsford reports that from an early age he found himself unable to accept the church's commitment to infant baptism and the Athanasian Creed.

In his autobiography, Rainsford (1922) describes his arrival in Canada as somewhat haphazard. He had visited North America once before in 1869, when he spent the better part of a year travelling through the Canadian prairies, the Rocky Mountains, the American Midwest and the South, "playing Indian" and hunting buffalo. Rainsford's second trip to North America was in 1876 as a revival preacher. Initially he conducted missions in New

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53 W. S. Rainsford, "Letter to the Press." The Mail (March 17, 1881). In this letter, Rainsford states that while he had hoped to see theatre reformed and include "actors of good moral tone and pure life," the featuring of Sarah Bernhardt made any reformation of the theatre impossible. Of Bernhardt he wrote, "this woman, of undoubted genius, openly flaunts her immorality in the face of Europe. She, a queen of the stage, having attained a position from which her influence is immense, casts aside restraints, the most vitally important that bind moral, not to say, religious, Society together." Indeed, Rainsford went so far as to claim that any Christians who celebrate Bernhardt's performance do a disservice to the many helpless and sinful servant girls who appeal to their Christian pity and that to do so constitutes "an utter reversal of earthly judgment."

York, Baltimore, Boston, London and Toronto before he was eventually called to a permanent position at St. James Anglican Cathedral in Toronto in 1878.

Rainsford's first visit to Toronto was on the heels of an extremely successful revival in London, Ontario. The vestry at St. James Cathedral asked Rainsford to fill in for the aging and ill Dean Grassett, whom Rainsford described as a "pronounced Evangelist" (1922: 170). The Gothic-style St. James Cathedral was rebuilt in 1853, after the original building was destroyed in the Great Fire of Toronto (1849). In 1874 the tower and spire were completed, making it the tallest building in Toronto until well into the twentieth century, when the Royal York Hotel surpassed it (see Arthur 1986: 129-137).

On the first night of his revival in Toronto, members of the community lined up in the snow for hours waiting to enter the Cathedral. Nightly, in an organized fashion, they filled the Cathedral—the pews, the aisles, the galleries, even the chancel where laypeople were usually forbidden—to capacity with standing room only, as thousands were turned away (Bonham 1886: 248-49). Among the many converts won during this revival was Toronto's future mayor, William Howland, who went on to found the Toronto City Mission (Airhart 1990b: 118-19); among the legacies of this revival was the establishment of Wycliffe College, originally the 'Protestant Episcopal Divinity School', by a lay group at the Cathedral to offer training for those who were inspired by the revival to a life of ministry (Edinborough 1978).

Rainsford remained in Toronto for four months before returning to England. While in England he took the time to marry and to study the thirty-nine articles of the Anglican Church. At this point, Rainsford added to his growing list of private theological objections the notion that the bible stands as the sole resource of Christian revelation. As such, he
adopted a progressivist understanding of the nature of God by arguing that the God of the Hebrew scriptures was not the same deity described by David in the Psalms or whom Jesus claimed to represent. From this, Rainsford concluded that if the scriptural understanding of the supernatural evolved so too should the church "modify customs and services as the needs of the time required" (1922: 177). Rainsford's motivations for these conclusions emerged out of his own ethical commitments—he increasingly saw the need for the church to respond to the social needs of society.

With this new and emerging worldview, Rainsford returned hesitantly to Toronto in 1878 as the assistant rector of St. James to help out due to the precarious health of Dean Grassett. Unable to preach his evangelical message because it no longer represented his understanding of the social role of the church, Rainsford encountered increasingly empty crowds at his revival meetings and the vestry members who had begged him to return became voices of dissent:

"We love you, we trust you, but what are you doing? You are not preaching as you used to preach, nor what you used to preach." "You are pulling down what you so lately built up, undoing what you did. You are confusing us all. Your friends can't understand you. Give us the old gospel you gave us with such power. For it people are hungry still." And as a final note, rightfully considering the responsibilities of their office, they added, "The collections have fallen greatly" (Rainsford 1922: 180)

As the weeks went on, Rainsford's friends withdrew their support and many of the St. James' congregants left the church. Looking back in his autobiography at his tenure in Toronto, Rainsford describes it as a dark time for him. He explains that he was "no longer" capable of preaching his former message of revival and salvation but that he did not "yet" have the words with which to describe the religious truths that he had uncovered (1922: 183).

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55 I specifically quote Rainsford's use of the terms "no longer" and "yet" because they are a central part of the arguments that I develop in this dissertation about the ways that progressive Christians position themselves
Rainsford did not explicitly deny his former beliefs, he attempted to recast his older reflections and teachings in a new light. In many ways, Rainsford exemplified a ethical commitment to belief and intellectual integrity by explaining that while at times he attempted to negotiate his views so as to not overtly offend anyone, "never under any circumstances, however, did I say anything that I did not believe was true" (122: 184). Although Rainsford attempted to keep a low profile, certain members of his congregation accused him of heretical beliefs regarding doctrines of atonement, the verbal inspiration of scripture and eternal punishment. The face of his congregation changed, as evangelicals such as William Hume Blake left and the controversial liberal journalist Goldwin Smith joined the congregation.56

Late in the summer of 1882, Dean Grassett passed away and the position of the incumbent for the Cathedral Church of St. James was offered to Rainsford. However, in offering the position to Rainsford, the vestry failed to consult the diocese's new bishop, who then intervened in the selection process. Submitting to the bishop's will, Rainsford accepted a position at St. George's Episcopal Church in New York City and left Toronto. It was from the pulpit of St. George's that Rainsford would go on to face the scrutiny of conservative and temporarily through their explications of what they "no longer" believe and have not "yet" given up believing (see Chapter Five of this dissertation).

56 Smith, a controversial figure, to say the least—he was a well-known critic of British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli and was notorious for his anti-Semitism—wrote extensively on topics from politics, literature, economics, science and philosophy but religion remained his primary focus. He believed wholeheartedly that religion dictates humanity's morality but that the current state of nineteenth-century Christianity made it next to impossible for individuals to be moral agents. From biblical historical criticism Smith concluded that Christianity had no need for the Hebrew bible as part of its foundation. Historian D. C. Masters explains that Smith occupies "a sort of half-way stage between Christian, and post-Christian liberalism" (Masters 1969: 33). Cook explains that Smith's version of Christianity had been reduced to the barest minimum. In his work, Guesses at the Riddle of Existence; and Other Essays on Kindred Subjects (1896), Smith contends that "If we must resign miracles, the Messianic prophecies and their supposed fulfilment in Christ, and the Trinitarian creed, what remains to us of the Gospel? There remains to us the Character, the sayings, and the parables, which made and have sustained moral, though not ritualistic, dogmatic or persecuting Christendom . . . If there is a Supreme Being, and if he is anywhere manifested in human history, it is here." Referencing this quote, Cook concludes that very little stood between Smith and atheism (Cook 1985: 30).
evangelical wings of the Episcopal Church, who often accused Rainsford of heresy and attempted to persuade the Bishop of Pennsylvania to try him for heresy in 1903, following a series of sermons he delivered at St. Stephen's Protestant Episcopal Church that year (Rainsford 1922: 117).

In the sermons that Rainsford delivered at St. George's, he argued that Jesus was human and not divine as the church has taught. In fact, Rainsford maintained the following: "As belief in the spiritual power and miracle-working power of Jesus spread, as his unique goodness and greatness came to be accepted, his followers very naturally came to think of him as conceived and born as was no common man" (1922: 373). He went on to stress that both Jesus and Paul misunderstood the parousia (end times), which they perceived as immanent. Rainsford explained that the reason for the belief in Jesus' divinity rests on a very human instinct and yearning for the divine, but that declaring Jesus as divine robs humanity of "a real practical guide and example; one we can follow and imitate down here on earth" (376).

In 1905, Rainsford suffered a nervous breakdown, which led to his eventual resignation from St. George's and subsequent retirement in 1906. He returned to his love for adventure and travelled extensively throughout Africa in the years following his retirement. In 1913, Rainsford wrote The Reasonableness of the Religion of Jesus, a book which clearly laid out his viewpoints on the church's misrepresentations of Jesus. He had astonished his friends and former parishioners the previous year by asking the bishop to formally divest him of his priestly orders (Hein and Shattuck 2004: 281-82).

As his New York Times obituary reports, one of Rainsford's final public appearances occurred when a special chair was endowed in his honour at the New York Town Hall in
May 1925. During his address to the crowd he explained that Christianity had become increasingly irrelevant to young people. "Banish the supernatural," he urged his audience and commanded them to forgo belief in the virgin birth and sacrificial atonement: "I believe in the Lord Jesus as a man, a real man. I believe he was born of the love of a good man and a good woman as God intended us all to be born. I believe he died as men die, only in unparalleled torture."

Rainsford's journey from stringent evangelical to near unitarianism is not unfamiliar to many in the late Victorian era who sought to revitalize Christianity by pushing a more rational and this-worldly agenda, in response to biblical higher criticism and Darwinian evolutionary theory. Indeed, as Paul M. Minus notes in his biography of the great social gospel leader Walter Rauschenbusch, Rainsford's sermons at St. George's were formative for many of Rauschenbusch's social gospel beliefs (Minus 1988: 45). Rainsford's purposeful representation of himself as a popular writer, rather than a scholar, reveals an important impulse of his preaching and reveals that he remained an evangelist in certain ways, despite his heretical approaches to Christian doctrine. At the end of his autobiography, Rainsford recounts that despite the hardships he would once again pursue the ministry as his vocation, if he were to live his life over again. Although he ultimately rejected his priestly duties, Rainsford explained that his vocation allowed him and others to pursue two core concerns of humanity, namely to believe in and seek the truth, and to believe in and serve humanity.

D. J. MacDonnell

Let it not go forth to the world that while they were stiff and stern in their dealings with one of their good men, because of a doubt entertained by him, they were doing nothing in regard to those men who were stupid and dull, and whose preaching was useless.
-- Professor Mowat, commenting on the ecclesiastical trial of D. J. Macdonnell, 1876 (McCurdy 1897: 100-101).

In his autobiography, Rainsford points to several figures who supported him during his time in Toronto, namely Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, Goldwin Smith and Reverend Dr. Daniel James MacDonnell, the Presbyterian minister who was charged with heresy in 1876. Writing about MacDonnell, Rainsford recounted, "Dr. D. J. Macdonnell, a Presbyterian. He had his own troubles, and passed for a heretic, though I fancy no single man in Toronto wielded more influence for good in those days. He was a man who comforted and helped me" (1922: 116-117).

According to Marshall, clergy were faced with the dilemma of aligning their own personal beliefs with their preaching. Balancing tradition with interpretation and authority with integrity led many clergy to question their role as leaders in and spokespersons for the church—as was the case for Egerton Ryerson, who resigned from the pulpit of the Methodist Church in 1854 (Marshall 1992: 39-40, 267-8; Hodgins 1883: 470). Marshall identifies Reverend Macdonnell as the prime example of an individual whose religious identity was ingrained with religious doubt and uncertainty. Writing in 1866, prior to his ordination, Macdonnell outlined his numerous struggles with doubts: "there have been times when I have almost vowed not to enter the church, not to come under obligations which I could not honestly take, not to put myself in a position in which I might be accused of dishonesty if I dared to say what I really thought" (quoted in Marshall 1989: 40).

Macdonnell studied at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario and went on to complete theological training at Glasgow University, where he was exposed to modern biblical criticism. He then was sent to Germany to study in the Ritschl school of optimistic theology.
Macdonnell was called first to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Peterborough, Ontario and four years later was installed at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Toronto, a vibrant downtown church located on the corner of King and Simcoe Streets. He struggled with theological and doctrinal teachings of the Presbyterian Church. In a sermon in 1874 the Presbyterian minister hinted to his congregation that he was wrestling with certain tenets in the Westminster Confession, which was under debate and eventually accepted as the official doctrine of the newly formed Presbyterian Church in Canada.  

On September 26th, 1875, during a sermon on Romans 5:12-21, Macdonnell expressed his concerns with assenting to notions of eternal punishment and damnation, which, as Marshall explains, was one of the most controversial theological topics in the 1870s (Marshall 1989: 42; Fraser 1995: 68). The difficulties of reconciling the notions of eternal punishment with the concept of an all-loving and merciful deity posed problems for Macdonnell. Some journalists who were present for this sermon reported on it in the Protestant paper, the Montreal Witness (McCurdy 1897: 88-89). Media interest about Macdonnell's theology peaked after some controversial comments made by Macdonnell, again concerning the Westminster Confession, at the opening of Knox College. The journalists, who themselves admitted that Macdonnell "tested the shorthand skill of the best newspapermen" (McLelland 1958: 274),

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57 The Presbyterian Church in Canada was formed on June 15, 1875. It consisted of the amalgamation of four Presbyterian Churches: The Canada Presbyterian Church; The Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Established Church of Scotland; The Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North America; and The Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces. Following Church Union in 1925 the United Church of Canada claimed the right to the name The Presbyterian Church in Canada. From 1925 to 1939, those Presbyterians who did not participate in Church Union were known as 'Continuing Presbyterians' and 'Non-Concurring Presbyterians'. They regained the legal rights to the name "Presbyterian Church in Canada" in 1939 (see Airhart: 1990b: 101).

58 In his role as a member of Knox College's Senate, Macdonnell reflected on the role of the Confession of Faith by indicating that while he appreciated its tolerance, he suspected that its original authors would probably wish that they had not composed it: "if they could have foreseen individual members of the Church exalting the document in the way that they never intended" (Toronto Mail October 7, 1875).
As a result of the article, Macdonnell was summoned before the Presbytery of Toronto on November 5, 1875 and calls were issued for a formal heresy trial to be conducted (Marshall 1989: 43; for a full account of the 'heresy trial' and General Assembly see McLelland 1958: 276-282; McCurdy 1897: 88-135). During the initial investigation conducted by Rev. William Caven, Principal of Knox College, Macdonnell maintained his position that had the Confession of Faith been written in recent times it would have contained "fewer propositions" and "more room for difference of opinion" (quoted in McLelland 1958: 277).

The church avoided an all-out heresy trial by suggesting that Macdonnell take time to contemplate the issues at hand. Macdonnell was scheduled to report to the committee at the Presbytery meeting that was scheduled immediately prior to the next General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in April 1876. Moreover, the Presbyterian minister was asked to issue a statement to the General Assembly where he affirmed that he subscribed to the Confession of Faith and teachings of the church on the issues of eternal damnation, despite his own doubts or difficulties regarding the doctrine. From the Church's perspective, this statement confirmed the Westminster Standards but created space for the individual to assume the right to his or her own private doubts concerning doctrines and official teachings (Fraser 1995: 96). In accounting for the accusations of heresy against him, Macdonnell explained that

59 There is no available text of the sermon because Macdonnell did not read his sermon from a prepared text. Compilations of the sermon were published in three sources: the Witness as "Universal Salvation" (October 12, 1875); the Toronto Mail as "The Hereafter" (October 12, 1875); and The Toronto Globe "Report on the Sermon" (October 12, 1875). The Globe's version was used by the Toronto and Kingston Synod in their investigation (see McLelland 1958: 275).

60 The exact wording of this statement is as follows: "I consider myself as under subscription to the Confession of Faith in accordance with my ordination vows, and I therefore adhere to the teaching of the Church as contained therein on the doctrine of the eternity or endless duration of the future punishment of the wicked, notwithstanding doubts or difficulties which perplex my mind" (Marshall 1989: 44-45).
he was in a position that held the Confession of Faith below Scriptures and that pertaining to his understanding of everlasting damnation there were three options: to believe, to deny or to doubt. Macdonnell, unable to ascertain the first or the second, adopted the third approach in regards to the Presbyterian Church's interpretation of "the teaching of Scripture as to the absolute, unconditional, hopeless endlessness of future punishment" (McCurdy 1897: 112).

The General Assembly concluded that Macdonnell's attitude was "one of doubt, as distinguished from belief on the one hand and denial on the other" (McLelland 1958: 282). After several rounds of voting, The General Assembly determined that the issue should go before the Toronto Presbytery meeting and subsequently to the General Assembly in 1877, at which point Macdonnell was asked to give a "categorical" answer as to whether or not he accepted the church's teachings (McCurdy 1897: 122). The reluctance of the Presbyterian Church to conduct a heresy trial signalled a transformation in the church's reliance upon doctrinal statements as a measure of orthodoxy. Many contemporaries viewed this transformation as preparation for church union (see, for example, Fraser 1915). Indeed, a year after the heresy charges, at the persistence of Macdonnell, the Presbyterian Church amended the statement signed by ordination candidates. In the new statement prospective clergy were no longer required to adhere to the Westminster Confession as the basis of their faith, but rather the bible alone as an "infallible" document was understood to be the measure of a candidate's devotion (Fraser 1995: 69).

Macdonnell remained relatively quiet on the issue from this point on. However, in 1889, after the death of his close friend, George Paxton Young—Professor of Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics at the University of Toronto—Macdonnell preached a sermon entitled "Death Abolished." In the text of the sermon he recounted that Young's struggles with church doctrine
explaining that "it was his inability to give the Westminster Confession the sort of assent which was expected by the Church that led to his resignation of his position in Knox College, and, subsequently, to his withdrawal from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church" (McCurdy 1987: 484-85). Despite his friend's doubts about the Westminster Confession, Macdonnell testified to his piety and his trust in God. He concluded that Young had been a true beacon of hope to his former students at the University of Toronto.

It has occasioned no surprise to hear on all hands of Professor Young's wonderful influence over his students, and, especially, to learn that not in one or two instances, but in many, young men who had been tempted to agnosticism or infidelity had been brought back or kept from going astray by the influence of their great teacher's simple faith and beautiful life (McCurdy 1987: 488).

Macdonnell's warm and passionate eulogy for his friend led many of his contemporaries to suspect that in relating Young's experience and perspective he was likewise describing his own.

Despite being embroiled in controversies, Macdonnell remained an active and important leader in Presbyterian Church. In 1877, he recommended that his good friend George Munro Grant assume the role of principal of Queen's after the sudden resignation of the current principal, William Snodgrass (Moir 2000). Macdonnell was also a member of several important committees, including the endowment committee of Queen's University, the Equal Rights Association (an organization dedicated to the defence of civil and religious rights in Ontario) and the Presbyterian Church's hymnal committee (established to compile a single hymnal out of selections from the hymnals used in the pre-union churches). Additionally, he raised funds for various Presbyterian missionary groups (McCurdy 1897; Moir 2000). Macdonnell's leadership in these and other committees and organizations illustrates a greater

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61 Macdonnell had served as a trustee of his alma mater, Queen's University, since 1869.
openness in the Presbyterian Church in Canada towards the end of the nineteenth century. Principal Grant's defence of Macdonnell's stance during the so-called heresy trial suggests that doubt was seen as a viable option from the perspective of both the clergy and the theological seminaries, particularly at Queen's University. In many ways, Macdonnell's experience foreshadows those of others within the United Church of Canada—the institutional heir of the union of Presbyterianism in Canada—such as Charles Templeton and Gretta Vosper and allows for doubt to be received as a viable religious stance for clergy.

George Workman

Even by the standards of late-nineteenth-century biblical criticism, Professor George Coulson Workman's lecture, "Messianic Prophecy," delivered on May 12, 1890 to the Victoria Theological Union, was fairly conservative. In his lecture, which was later published in full by the *Canadian Methodist Quarterly*, Workman suggested that the prophets in the Hebrew bible sought to address the prevailing issues and problems of their own society, rather than to predict the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. He urged his audience to read the bible in light of its historical context rather than as insight into the events depicted in the New Testament (Lindstrom 1972: 30-1; Cook 1985: 21). Regardless of its seemingly innocuous suggestions, Workman's lecture generated much outrage both at the time of its delivery and the subsequent weeks, months and years. In later reflections on the lecture, Workman recalled that he delivered it "in the face of frequent interruption" (Workman 1899:12). His lecture sought to redefine the role of the prophets in the biblical narrative by arguing that instead of possessing

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63 Workman's mentor at Leipzig, Franz Julius Delitzsch, was considered to be quite conservative in his method and approach to biblical criticism (Allen 2008: 126).
revelatory knowledge about the future, a prophet is an individual with hyper-sensitive perceptions about the present state of affairs (Lindstrom 1972: 31). In forming this argument, he sought to clarify the moral and spiritual truths of the Christian narrative in order to make it more relevant to contemporary scientific and historical studies. Workman later expanded his thesis in book form and also published a text outlining his response to the criticisms of his lecture to the Committee of the Bay of Quinte Conference in Belleville Ontario on April 17-18, 1899.64

In his discussion of the Workman case, Cook explains that Workman represents the initial battle against biblical criticism in the Methodist Church (Cook 1985: 20). Cook asserts that unlike in the Calvinist traditions, the Canadian Methodist Church never developed a systematic theology and therefore was far more dependent on the doctrines of biblical inerrancy and divine inspiration. Thus, Workman's scholarship represented a real threat to the institutional and theological statures of Methodism (Cook 1985: 20; cf. Gauvreau 1984). Likewise, drawing upon Cook's work, Van Die identifies Workman as one of several figures whom historians claim to have been "directly though unwittingly responsible for the profound shift in religious thought in the early-twentieth-century" (Van Die 1989: 187).

Originally from Ontario, Workman earned both his B.A. (1875) and his M.A. (1878) at Victoria College. Following his graduation he served in parish ministry for four years before being appointed to the Faculty of Theology at Victoria College and sent to Leipzig for doctoral work in order to qualify for his teaching appointment (Lindstron 1972: 30). Workman's earlier

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64 Workman, George C. 1897. The Old Testament Vindicated as Christianity's Foundation Stone. Toronto: W. Briggs. It is interesting to note that this work was published by the Methodist publishing house. Other works by Workman include: The Text of Jeremiah: Or, A Critical Investigation of the Greek and Hebrew, with the Variations in the LXX; Translated into the Original and Explained (1889); Messianic Prophecy Vindicated: Or, An Explanation and Defence of the Ethical Theory (1899); The Servant of Jehovah: Or, the Passion-Prophecy of Scripture Analysed and Elucidated (1907); Atonement; Or, Reconciliation with God (1911); Jesus the Man and Christ the Spirit (1928).
work on Jeremiah had been well-received (Semple 1996: 270) and he had received accolades from several key leaders in the church, including Nathanel Burwash, who had defended him against calls for heresy charges and was open to what he and other Methodist clergy and professors called "reverent criticism" (Gauvreau 1991: 166-174). The primary opponent of Workman and his work was E. H. Dewart, who was able to apply his criticism of Workman to his larger claims that clergy were responsible for growing disbelief in Canadian society (Marshall 1992: 77; Gauvreau 1991: 178-80). In response to Workman's lecture, Dewart published a 256 page exposition on the topic, *Jesus the Messiah in Prophecy and Fulfilment: A Review and Refutation of the Negative Theory of Messianic Prophecy* (1891). Despite Burwash's objections, Victoria College's Board of Directors decided to remove Workman from the Faculty of Theology and place him in the Faculty of Arts, where he taught philology (Horn 1999: 26; Van Die 1989: 104). At this time, appointments in theology were determined by the church, not the university, and members of the board were reluctant to include individuals who did not ascribe to basic tenets of Methodist theology on their staff (Semple 1996:270; Marshall 1992:79).65

Workman ultimately decided to resign from his teaching position in 1882, citing the board's lack of confidence as his primary reason (Horn 1999: 26). He then proceeded with parish ministry for the next few years and was hired as professor of Old Testament exegesis and literature at the Montreal Wesleyan Theological College in 1903 (Horn 1999: 26). However, Workman's tenure at the Montreal Wesleyan Theological College was short lived. In 1907, the College provided Workman with a notice of dismissal after they ruled that his

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65 It should be noted that C. B. Sissons refutes this assumption by pointing out that Workman's successor John F. McLaughlin held an equally modern theological perspective but managed to hold his position for forty years without any doctrinal disputes. According to Sissons, the reasons for Workman's dismissal had more to do with personality conflicts than they did with disagreements over biblical criticism (Sissons 1952: 193; see also Antonides 1995: 58).
doctrine was not consistent with that of the Methodist Church. Although Workman appealed the ruling to the Methodist General Council in 1910, the higher authorities of the institutional church determined that the theological college had the right to dismiss any faculty, as long as it was in keeping with the 'laws of the land'. Following this decision, Workman sued the college for wrongful dismissal and libel in 1911, and the Quebec Superior Court ruled that the board of the college had no right to determine whether or not Workman's doctrine was sound and subsequently awarded him $3,500 in damages (Horn 1999: 27). Unfortunately for Workman, however, the legal proceedings did not end there, and his payout was rescinded during an appeal when the appellants managed to prove to the court that Workman's views were, in fact, heretical (Horn 1999: 27).

The trials that Workman faced and the anger that he aroused in the likes of Dewart and others point to the central role that he, and subsequent biblical critics, played in the development of the Canadian Protestant psyche or at least the psyche of those engaged in theological debate, from the Victorian era into the twentieth century. The new 'higher criticism' challenged the prevailing worldviews of clergy, professors and laity within the church, but it would be several decades before the Methodist Church and other Protestant denominations made sense of it all (Allen 2008:129-134). According to Richard Allen, the unintended consequence of biblical criticism, especially that of scholars like Workman who focused on the Hebrew bible, was the formation of a new social consciousness. Once the biblical prophets were removed from their Christian-derived and messianic teleology, a new way of embracing and potentially replicating their societal critique was enabled. If the Hebrew prophets were able to cry in the name of God for justice and a more ethical treatment of the

66 Such as Joseph Campbell at the Presbyterian College in Montreal and Juluis Steen at the Montreal Anglican College.
poor, the obvious extension for many during the late Victorian era was that they too should
pursue similar ends in the name of God (Allen 2008: 134). Out of this new social
consciousness emerged a new way of being Christian across North America. This way of
being Christian remained intact until the effects of the first and second world wars and social
changes in the 1950s forced Christians to once again reconsider their understanding of the
bible and the social effects of Christianity upon contemporary society.

Charles Templeton

Like Rainsford, it took only a few years for Charles Templeton's theology to change
dramatically. With his flashy bowties and glow-in-the-dark socks, Charles Templeton led
Youth for Christ revivals across Canada and the United States in the 1940s.67 Like his good
friend and associate, Billy Graham, Templeton attracted thousands to Maple Leaf Gardens,
Massey Hall and other venues across Canada, the United States and Europe and worked to
bring fundamentalism into the mainstream (Kee 2006: 151). As jugglers and acrobats
performed on stage, Templeton moved through the audience like a game show host asking
questions and providing commentary. His revivals were unique in that they blurred the
distinction between audience as spectator and audience as performer (Kee 2006: 156).

Templeton's life-journey went from high school dropout and hard-drinking newspaper
reporter to one of the most influential evangelists in North America. He eventually became a
Princeton Seminary-educated, United Church of Canada-supported advocate of the practicality

67 Templeton began organizing youth meetings in 1944. Initially held at Toronto's Massey Hall these meetings
drew crowds of 2,800 people on Saturday evenings. In 1945, Templeton met with Torrey Johnson and co-
founded Youth for Christ. Along with Billy Graham, Templeton was considered one of the best preachers the
evangelical organization ever had. In an interview discussing the early days of Youth for Christ, Johnson
recounts that Templeton's strengths laid in his versatility: "He could adapt to the situation very well. If it was
evangelistic, he could preach an evangelistic message. If it was devotional, he could be devotional. If it was on
what we call the deeper life...deeper Christian life, he could give something along those lines" (Billy Graham
Centre Archives, Collection 282, T4 Transcript).
of religion. Templeton first began to doubt his faith at Princeton Theological Seminary, and his transformation was two-fold. Initially targeting young people in a circus-like atmosphere for Youth for Christ, he delivered the message that young people needed that "old time religion" and preached personal conversion and evangelism. In the 1950s, Templeton later changed his modus operandi in order to conform to the middle-class demographic of the United Church of Canada and other mainline denominations. During this time he was critical of his former work in Youth for Christ by complaining that their evangelistic tactics were "shallow" and overly concerned with numbers (Kee 2004: 244). In addressing a mainline audience, Templeton continued to preach an evangelistic message and maintained his popularity. After witnessing Templeton's tour in 1953 with the National Council of Churches, one reporter declared that Templeton was to religion "what Mickey Mantle is to baseball or Perry Como to his singing fans" (Boyd 1953). In such instances, he appealed to his new mainline audiences with soothing classical music and a sensible message of Christian morality, a move which Kee suggests was more aligned with the interests and preferences of the mostly young married couples in Templeton's new flock, as well as his own post-Princeton theology (Kee 2004: 246).

Later, Templeton's transformation took a radical turn when he ultimately abandoned Christianity and publically declared that he was an agnostic in 1957. After his loss of faith,

68 From 1952-1954, Templeton split his time between the United Church of Canada and the National Council of Churches (in the United States). From 1955-1956 he served as the Director of Evangelism for the Presbyterian Church of the United States, during which time he was also the host of a CBS television show, "Look Up and Live," which was directed towards young people (Kee 2004: 245).

69 Ironically, shallowness was an accusation against Templeton in the later years of his life, when he ran for political office for the Liberal Party of Canada. In his column on Templeton's death, for example, CBC columnist Larry Zolf recalls that the following proverb was often recited at the Toronto Star: "down deep, Charles Templeton is shallow." Zolf also recounts that in the eyes of many Templeton will be remembered as a snake-oil medicine man (Zolf 2001: np). Likewise, in Templeton's obituary in the Globe and Mail columnist Donn Downey wrote that "while Charles Templeton was a jack-of-all-trades, he was also a master of none" (Downey 2001: R11).
Templeton returned to journalism and ran to be leader of the Ontario provincial Liberal Party in 1964. As an agnostic he published two religious texts. The first, *Jesus: The Four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Combined in One Narrative and Rendered in Modern English* (1973), became an almost instant best-seller. His second book, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith* (1996), recounts his struggles with biblical criticism and evolutionary theory. In the latter, Templeton outlines his concerns and doubts that began early in his years as an evangelist and were cemented when he was as a special student in the graduate program at Princeton Theological Seminary. Along with these texts, Templeton also published several novels, including *The Kidnapping of the President*, which was made into a feature film starring William Shatner in 1980.

Kevin Kee (2004; 2006) singles Templeton out as an exemplary figure for understanding the development of twentieth-century evangelicalism. Drawing on his experience as a sports reporter for the *Globe*, Templeton commodified religion in such a way that its resemblance to commercial culture enabled the gospel to compete with worldly activities and interests rather than standing separate from them. With this in mind, Templeton is important, according to Kee, because he forces scholars of Canadian church history to look beyond the polarization of 'sacred' and 'secular'. Rather than viewing the two as culturally antagonistic to one another, one must consider the ways that evangelicals have strategically employed so-called secular culture as a means to promote Christianity (Kee 2004: 252-53).

Although he was not the first to "sell" religion, Templeton was particularly effective in his marketing. Indeed the effects of Templeton's program, especially his work with Billy Graham, continue to inform evangelical Christian public representations and marketing strategies (see, for example, Moore 1994; Roof 1999; Hendershot 2004; McDannell 1995).
Likewise, Templeton's later work for the United Church of Canada, the National Council of Churches and the Presbyterian Church in the United States continued to follow the pattern of the marketing strategies he implemented in his earlier years. Kee also suggests that Templeton's recommodification of religion so as to remain "relevant to Canadians who were experiencing changing socio-economic circumstances" is an important alternative to the established narrative of a clash between religion and secular consumer cultures (2004: 252). Additionally, it seems that Templeton's concerns with relevancy reverberate in more recent manifestations of the United Church of Canada. Although it was already in development when Templeton was hired, the United Church of Canada's 1963 implementation of the New Curriculum, which attempted to provide access for all age groups to contemplate biblical higher criticism and socially relevant topics mirrors core themes of Templeton's evangelism. A few years later, in 1967, the United Church of Canada joined with other mainline denominations to sponsor an ecumenical pavilion at Expo '67, where visitors were shown shocking and dehumanizing images of suffering throughout the world and asked to reflect on these images. Kee describes this display as "thoughtful, but in no way enjoyable" and suggests that "the presentation was a fitting symbol of the church's attempt to disengage itself from the entertaining evangelism that it had sponsored just a few years earlier" (Kee 2004: 253).

Kee's analysis of Templeton offers valuable insights into Templeton's journey, which is comparable to that of Rainsford. However, as David Vance (2008) notes, Kee's depiction of Templeton as modern evangelist par excellence is in tension with Templeton's self-representation in his autobiography, Anecdotal Memoir (1982). A further exploration of Templeton's life offers even more insight into Templeton's roles within Canadian Protestantism as well as the general tenure of Canadian Protestantism at the middle of the
twentieth century. Indeed, Templeton's struggles with skepticism, doubt and eventual agnosticism, plagued many religious thinkers during the middle of the twentieth century, a time marked by rapid societal criticism and change, and by the mid-1960s—within many seminaries—the promotion of 'Death of God' theology. For example, in her study of Canadian universities in the mid-twentieth century, Catherine Gidney concludes that post-war Christianity, in particular liberal Christianity, lost the privileged position that it previously held in universities. In so doing, Gidney argues that in many ways, liberal Protestants eroded traditional sites of authority (Gidney 2004).

Changes in thinking ushered in an atmosphere of candidness that allowed both clergy and laity to voice critiques of the role of the church and its doctrines in society. Templeton's declaration of his new agnosticism occurred during a time in which many figures within and outside of the church were publicising and calling for changes to the church's beliefs and practices. In the United Kingdom, controversial and popular bishop John A. T. Robinson published *Honest to God* (1963), where he called for a "recasting of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms," including an insistence that "the most fundamental categories of our theology—of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself—must go into the melting" (1963: 9). Robinson’s work is one of the first popular texts to attempt to present biblical criticism to laity in a popular format, and to align the Christian narrative with scientific and empirical observations about the world. Closer to home, in Canada, well-known journalist and popular historian Pierre Berton was invited by the Anglican Church of Canada to conduct a study of the role of the church in contemporary society. The resulting text, *The Comfortable Pew* (1965), was an instantaneous best seller, leading one Anglican priest to declare it "possibly the most important document since Martin Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses" and still others
to compare Berton to the Hebrew prophet Amos or John the Baptist (see Stackhouse 1990: 210). In her discussion of the effects of Berton's text on Canadian Protestants Klassen (2011) suggests that Berton furthers a way of contending with modernity "through habits of critique" (2011: 211). As this dissertation reveals, this practice of critiquing the church grew increasingly popular in late twentieth and early twenty-first century as both laity and church leaders became increasingly concerned with the church's role in society and its future. For example, in his book, Berton was primarily concerned with the social and political activities of the church, especially in relation to war, nuclear weapons, racism, colonialism, changing opinions on sexuality and gender, in addition the need to dissolve hierarchies within the church as an institution.70 While Berton's and Robinson's works were written in the 1960s they addressed conversations and issues that had arisen in the previous decade. Exposed to similar social, intellectual and cultural forces, Charles Templeton lost his faith in God.

In sum, Templeton's journey can be understood as one that is marked by religious and anti-religious enthusiasms. And, as I discuss later in this dissertation, for many formerly committed Christians, a departure from Christianity can take a form as equally dramatic as conversion. Reflecting on his conversion to Christianity, Templeton wrote in his autobiography that after one of many late nights out he returned home to his mother's house at 3 a.m.; she called him into her bedroom and began to discuss her own new-found faith in God. Templeton recounts that he conducted an inventory of his own life and discovered that it suddenly "seemed empty and wasted and sordid" (Templeton 1983: 33-34). As he began to

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70 Based on Berton's work, the United Church of Canada in 1968 composed a new creed to be used as an alternative to the Apostles Creed (Stackhouse 1990: 210-11). As John G. Stackhouse explains, this new creed was criticised by some who felt that it focused on humanity rather than God or the bible, which for the committee who composed it, was in part the point. As they explained, this creed stood as an "attempt to make contact with contemporary persons beset by questions about man, lostness and loneliness on the one hand and man's self-sufficiency in world affairs on the other" (Stackhouse 1990: 211).
pray and weep, Templeton suddenly felt as though a large weight was being lifted from his body: "I could have leaped over a wall. An ineffable warmth began to suffuse every corpuscle" (1983: 33-34). In the early morning as he finally drifted off to sleep, Templeton recalled "an indescribable sense of well being at the centre of an exultant, all encompassing joy" (1983: 34). For Templeton the primary focus for Christianity was on the personal conversion moment. As Kee delineates, Templeton saw conversion as a way of explaining the emotional and psychological release that accompanied his new religious beliefs. Kee further notes that, in Templeton's case, conversion provides a framework of how life should be lived from the point of conversion onward (Kee 2004: 236).

This theme is picked up by Vance, who argues that Templeton's loss of faith should be understood as a fluid process, not a "sudden intellectual 'enlightenment' or a simple one-time rejection of certain essential beliefs" (Vance 2008:5). Instead, Templeton's deconversion was as revolutionary as his original conversion in shaping and structuring his worldview and lifestyle and laying the foundation for his future intellectual endeavours. Despite his enormous success, Templeton was overcome by anxiety and suffering chest pains. After seeking out

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71 This point is supported by Templeton's one-time partner in Youth for Christ, Torrey Johnson, who recounts that Templeton's familiarity with the bible was mediocre. In an interview Johnson explained that "the danger with Charles Templeton as I think of him as a preacher was this: that he was so eloquent, the danger was that you were taken up with his eloquence more than with the substance." Torrey went onto to explicate that often when preaching, "he [Templeton] gave a marvellous message on the cross, but he never quoted one single verse of Scripture" (Billy Graham Centre Archives, Collection 282, T4 Transcript).

72 Chapter Four of this dissertation explores the term deconversion, the history of its usage within the study of religion and its applicability to progressive Christianity. In that chapter I argue that deconversion narratives, in many ways like conversion narratives, strengthen an adherent's current religious affiliation by allowing them to organize and maintain their current way of being Christian in juxtaposition to a former, earlier one. Furthermore, I suggest that the deconversion narrative provides a means of justifying moral or ethical positions when it comes to beliefs, practices and identity. For the sake of brevity, and because the term is explored in depth later in this dissertation, for the time being, I will define deconversion as the process through which one departs from a religious tradition. That being said, it should not be confused with merely leaving a tradition, but rather as consisting of a dramatic and conscious choice against a specific religious tradition, often in favour of a new one. In the case of Templeton and many progressive Christians, this new tradition is agnosticism or atheism.
medical counsel, Templeton was ultimately advised that his chest pains were psychosomatic and were related to an unresolved conflict in his life. Much like his initial conversion experience, Templeton linked the physical symptoms to religious doubt, in many ways, extrapolating the religious frameworks of his conversion experience into his ensuing loss of faith. In his work on Templeton, Vance argues that despite Templeton's new found agnosticism, he continued throughout his life to perform and commodify his religiosity in his writings, journalism and political aspirations.

Near the end of his life, Templeton sat down with Lee Strobel, an evangelical journalist and writer, to discuss his agnosticism. Strobel asked him if he ever doubted his doubt, to which Templeton succinctly replied, "No." Clarifying his position, Templeton explained that while he would like to believe in God, he simply could not. Templeton had invested a lot of time into contemplating and developing his position on the existence of God, and all of the evidence he possessed led him to the conclusion that there is no God. Templeton justified his position by pointing out that he had "spent a lifetime thinking about it." He went on to state that if his position,

"were a simplistic conclusion reached on a whim, that would be different. But it's impossible for me—impossible—to believe that there is anything or person or being that could be described as a loving God who could allow what happens in our world daily [to happen]. . . . There cannot be, in our world, a loving God." (Templeton in Strobel 2009: n.p.).

Notable for my subsequent discussion of progressive Christianity is the ethical stance that Templeton assigns here to both himself and God. In Templeton's mind, God cannot exist because his existence would imply that he is unethical, a position based on the fact that God allows suffering to occur in the world. Likewise, it is impossible for Templeton to believe that God exists because this would require him to admit that God was capable of being unethical.
What is most interesting is that within the framework presented here, the agency rests not initially with Templeton. Instead, the non-existent God is the primary agent who makes his existence impossible through the merit of allowing terrible things to happen in the world. Templeton is then forced to not believe, based on the empirical evidence before him. Assuming God's agency as the primary agency is, of course, a familiar pattern for a former evangelical or fundamentalist to follow and supports my suggestion that Templeton's agnosticism is in many ways a direct extrapolation of his former evangelicalism.

**Tom Harpur**

"The real problem with the Protestant Reformation was that it was not radical enough," wrote Canadian journalist and former Anglican priest, Tom Harpur, over twenty years ago (Harpur 1986: 92). Harpur echoed this sentiment as we sat side-by-side in a pew at the back of the Cathedral Church of St. James (Anglican) in Toronto.73 His voice resounded through W. S. Rainsford's former cathedral as he explained to me that "at the Reformation, unfortunately they [the Protestants] got rid of one pope and took over the paper-pope!"

Many Canadians are familiar with Harpur's 2004 book, *The Pagan Christ*, which is a comparative analysis of the similarities between Jesus and the Egyptian deity Horus. In doing so, Harpur draws upon the scholarship of Godfrey Higgins (1771-1834), Gerald Massey (1828-1907) and Alvin Boyd Kuhn (1880-1963) to argue that Horus and Jesus—along with other figures such as Iusa, Hercules, Adonis, Mithras, Dionysus and Krishna—are representations of a Christ-archetype (Harpur 2004: 22). According to Harpur, the fact that the events recorded in the Christian New Testament did not actually occur was generally

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73 This interview took place on December 9, 2005 (see King 2007).
acknowledged by all early Christians up until the third and fourth centuries, at which point, according to Harpur:

The Christian Church made a fatal and fateful error. Either deliberately, in a competitive bid to win over the greatest numbers of the largely unlettered masses, or through wilful ignorance of the true, inner sense of profound spiritual wisdom it had inherited from ancient sources, the Church took a literalist, popularized, historical approach to sublime truth (Harpur 2004: 2).

As such, Harpur argues that the early Christians, like all people in antiquity "did not believe their myths" (Harpur 2004: 19). Rather they employed the myth of Jesus as a God-man in order to explain the potential that exists in everyone to be both human and divine.

Harpur has long stood as a voice of dissent and heresy within contemporary Canadian Anglicanism. As a student at the University of Toronto, he completed his bachelor of arts in 1951 and went on to study classics at the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar from 1951 to 1954. Between 1954 and 1956, Harpur studied theology at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, and subsequently was ordained in 1957. He then served as an Anglican priest in the Toronto Diocese for seven years, which was followed by a teaching position in New Testament studies at the University of Toronto's School of Theology. When Harpur left his teaching position in 1971 to become a journalist, he believed that he was still pursuing a career as a teacher. In fact, Harpur explained to me the following: "one of the most formative things in my thinking about theology and any ability I have to communicate at all was the decision to leave teaching in an academic setting and to begin teaching in the journalistic setting."

Harpur's early popular writings consist of books with titles such as For Christ's Sake (1986), The God Question and Other Faith Issues (1993) and Would You Believe?: Finding God Without Leaving Your Mind (1996). These books, as well as his regular columns in the
Toronto Star,⁷⁴ are fairly liberal attempts to make sense of his own struggles with biblical texts in light of historical scholarship. For example, in For Christ's Sake (1986) Harpur champions a historical-metaphorical interpretation of biblical texts.⁷⁵ In contrast The Pagan Christ develops a theology that jettisons any need for historical events and ultimately interprets the entire biblical text and subsequent theological doctrines as metaphorical. The most important consideration in The Pagan Christ is that nothing in the biblical text should be seen as literal, and therefore the bible need not be considered literally or even historically.⁷⁶ Doing so provides Harpur with the means of creating a venue in which to construct a new cosmology and belief structure while simultaneously maintaining a Christian identity.

Harpur's desire to maintain a Christian affiliation, rather than departing from Christianity, like Templeton and others, points to an important trend within contemporary progressive Christianity explored within this dissertation. In speaking as a Christian and writing to a Christian audience, Harpur represents himself in the public sphere as a heretic. Whereas his earlier works attempted to manipulate the biblical narrative so that it conformed to his own theological stance, Harpur's more recent work ultimately concludes that humanity does not require any narrative through which to access the divine and that one may pick and choose from a variety of texts. When I asked him about his current position, Harpur explained

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⁷⁴ Harpur wrote for the Toronto Star for thirty years, twelve of which he served as the religion editor.

⁷⁵ A historical-metaphorical approach is popular with and advocated by many liberal and progressive theologians. It relies on contemporary critical scholarship to determine which elements of the bible reflect actual historical occurrences and which elements are more appropriately read as metaphors. Marcus Borg has identified the historical-metaphorical method as a liberal attempt to "rescue a few facts from the fire," in which those elements of the faith narrative that are considered important and social reliable are viewed as historically accurate and those less important elements are explained as metaphors. Common examples include the Virgin Birth, Resurrection, Jesus' walking on water and other miracles stories (Borg 1996: 28).

⁷⁶ It should be noted that Harpur's work has not been well received by those in the mainline churches or by scholars in the academic study of religion. When the Pagan Christ was first released he was criticised for his use of obscure scholars, whose theories had been dismissed by the academy many years previously, and for misrepresenting or taking liberties with the historical evidence (see for example Heath 2003-2005; Piovanelli 2006; Porter and Bedard 2006).
to me that he has reached "a happier, wider, more connected to the universe place." This sentiment is echoed in his recently published autobiography, *Born Again: My Journey from Fundamentalism to Freedom* (2008). Traditional Christianity is replaced, in Harpur's new worldview, by social justice, inclusiveness and compassion. Each individual is invited, according to Harpur, to see themselves as "an integral, interconnected part of the whole cosmos" (second principle, tomharpur.com).

As we prepare to leave the Cathedral, Harpur turns to me and states that "God is a God who moves. He's on the move."—Harpur stops to offer a clarification lest I assume he intends to refer to God in the masculine form—"He or She. And we've got to move with God or be dragged along kicking and screaming, or else become totally irrelevant to the entire enterprise."

*Gretta Vosper*

Can the church slough off the encrustations of two millennia of ecclesial doctrine and theology in order to address the world's most urgent needs? Can it let itself dissolve into the pool of ideals, passion, and hope-filled primordial elements out of which it once grew and find in a new mix, in new combinations of those elements, something of value to offer the world? Can we who work in it, worship in it, watch it, and critique it[,] open ourselves to what might emerge from the chaotic pool? . . . I am convinced that we must try and that we must try now.

- Gretta Vosper, *With or Without God*, pp. 2-3

When Gretta Vosper's daughter, Hazel, was ten years old, she asked God to heal her elementary school teacher who had been stricken with a brain tumour. Earnestly, Hazel prayed and prayed and prayed but unfortunately her teacher passed away. Vosper watched as her daughter faced the realities of death, the heartbreaking loss of a loved one and the
disappointment and feelings of abandonment that accompanies unanswered prayers. Despite the fact that she was an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada, Vosper was unable to answer her daughter's questions: *why did my teacher die? I prayed to God and asked him to make her better. Why didn't God answer my prayers?* Vosper did not have the answers to these and other questions but was prompted to explore Hazel's doubts and her own doubts openly with her family and her congregation. In the following years, Vosper has made a name for herself as a controversial and heretical minister advocating the position that Christianity should jettison its traditional beliefs and practices. Her critics contend that she has no right to call herself a Christian, yet Vosper believes that she has inherited the tradition of Jesus and countless other unnamed individuals who have passionately dedicated themselves to making the world a better place.

Vosper grew up in the United Church of Canada. She completed her undergraduate degree at Mount Allison University in 1978 and received her Master's of Divinity from Queen's Theological College in 1990. Ordained in 1992, Vosper served at St. Matthew's United Church, in Toronto, from 1992-1997 and then was called to West Hill United Church in 1997. At West Hill United Church, Vosper inherited from the previous ministers—Fred

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77 During my fieldwork at West Hill United Church, I have heard Vosper and other members of her community related this story on several occasions. It is also referenced in Leslie Scrivener's *Toronto Star* article, "Don't Give Them Old-time Religion: Progressive Christians Focus on Values, Discard Belief in Divine Intervention Toronto Undergoes New Spiritual Developments" (Nov 21, 2004, A.01).

78 In a podcast interview with T. J. Dawe, a Vancouver-based performance artist, Vosper explains that the fact that she is Christian is, in part, happenstance—she grew up in a Christian family and because of this, Jesus was the first person whom she encountered who taught these 'core' values. In the interview she explained, "I am still a Christian because that story, those things that Jesus is reported to have said and done and quite honestly he probably didn't do most of them, but what I take away from that story is the image of someone who said, never stop, never stop trying to make it better no matter what it costs. Use your whole life and pour it into what it is that you think needs to be better in this world (Vosper in Recorded Interview with T. J. Dawe. Available Online at: [http://beamsandstruts.com/articles/item/375-interview-with-gretta-vosper](http://beamsandstruts.com/articles/item/375-interview-with-gretta-vosper). Accessed July 6, 2011).

In *With Or Without God*, Vosper summarises what it means to be Christian and defends her status as a Christian despite her 'heretical views' as follows: "to be Christian, for me, is to do whatever it takes to bind me to a life lived in a radically ethical way" (2008: 197).
— a community that was in the process of seeking transformation while engaging with popular texts featuring biblical criticism. According to an article in the United Church's magazine, *The Observer*, West Hill's transformation began in 2000, when Vosper—who was up until that point attempting to preach in a style that would satisfy both her progressive and evangelical parishioners—preached a sermon in which she "clearly stated she doesn't believe that God intervenes in our lives" (McPhee, 2005: 16).

Many of West Hill's congregants left the church at that point and still others departed in 2005 when Vosper began to be the subject of media attention for her outspoken theology. As many in the church reported to me, it was not until it was publically acknowledged that Vosper's stance departed radically from middle-of-the-road liberal Christianity that members made the choice to join a nearby liberal, but less progressive, community. What I find most interesting is that in the conversations that I had with members of West Hill United Church, they explained that the members who had departed the church had left because of the use of language during the services. As one member recounted in an interview:

79 Sanguin is currently the minister at Canadian Memorial United Church and Centre for Peace in Vancouver, British Columbia who advocates a progressive-style theology called 'evolutionary Christianity'. Since his tenure at West Hill United Church, Sanguin has also authored several popular theological texts including the following: *Summoning the Whirlwind* (2005), *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity* (2007), *The Emerging Church: A Model for Change and a Map for Renewal* (2008) and most recently, *If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics* (2010).

80 Two news articles introduced Vosper's theology to a wider audience. The first was "Don't Give Them Old-Time Religion," by Leslie Scrivener in the *Toronto Star* (Nov 21 2004), and the second was "Thinking Outside the Box," by Jennifer McPhee in *The United Church Observer* (February, 2005). McPhee's article provoked a stream of letters to the editor that lasted for twelve months. Vosper's and West Hill United Church's theology and role within the United Church of Canada continue to be discussed and hotly debated on the discussion boards on the United Church of Canada's website, Wondercafe.ca. According to Vosper, it was McPhee's article that also prompted another minister at a neighbouring church to appeal to her Presbytery to hold a formal meeting in order to determine whether or not she was "in continuity with the faith of the church" (Vosper 2008: 96). See also Tom Harpur's article on progressive Christianity in the *Toronto Star* from September 28, 2003, "Valuing Search Over Certainty."
For some people church is not just theology, it's creating an emotional connection with the hymns that you sing, the words that you hear, the prayers that you say. And if you don't say those things and do those things it's not church—you don't get that feeling, they don't feel what they would call God moving; they don't feel the holy presence or anything sacred.

I find it striking that in this instance and throughout my fieldwork, ultimately, it was not Vosper's beliefs that people found offensive but rather the language with which she and other members of the progressive Christian movement chose to express those beliefs. Whether semantics is actually the reason that former adherents left the church is, of course, uncertain, because these explanations were presented to me by active members of the community who, when asked directly about those members who had left, expressed that they felt betrayed by their former fellow congregants. Regardless their point about language and the experience brought about through performed language is an important theme explored in this dissertation.

Public testimonies of disbelief in the media and from the pulpit are not uncommon, especially in the United Church of Canada. In 1997, early into his new position as moderator of the United Church of Canada, Bill Phipps, like Templeton before him and Vosper after him, publically declared his doubts concerning a core tenet of Christian doctrine. In response to a question about the divinity of Jesus by the editorial board of the Ottawa Citizen, Phipps responded "no" when asked "is Jesus God?" (Ottawa Citizen, 2 Nov 1997). For several weeks afterwards, Phipps's comment was discussed and debated in church and national media, and in many ways this early statement came to define Phipps's tenure as moderator of the United Church of Canada.

In an article written for the Theological Digest and Outlook, the United Church of Canada's more conservative intellectual journal, Roger Hutchinson (1999) points out that that
the problem rested in the directness of Phipp's answer. In the article, Hutchinson states that had Phipps

. . . qualified his answer with an academic discussion of the difference between literal and metaphorical language, both his critics and the media would soon have lost interest. It was his direct answer to a straightforward question that put a crack in the protective plaster and produced the current flurry of interest in his beliefs. (Hutchinson 1999: np).

Hutchinson's point is important when considering Vosper's case because it is not so much her declarations but how and where she says them—primarily the media and the pulpit—that her critics find troublesome.81

The subtitle of Vosper's book, With Or Without God: Why The Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Believe, is indicative of her theological and ontological approach to both her life and liturgy. Vosper's approach favours experience over tradition. Thus her theological stance is based on those tenets she knows to be true. Discussing her beliefs and whether or not she adopts animism or new age spiritual practices, she says, "I remain open to the possibility that science may find proof for some of them, but I cannot and will not, in the absence of proof, present any of them as true" (Vosper 2008: 70).82 Likewise, the services that Vosper and the community at West Hill United Church compose focus upon the experiences of the individuals present. During the time of prayer a microphone is passed

81 Since 2008, every Tuesday at 9am, Vosper has debated the equally controversial Charles McVety, President of the Canada Family Action Coalition, on the John Oakley Show, a local talk radio show. Vosper has been featured in national media include CBC Radio's The Current. Likewise, Vosper frequently writes letters to the editor in the Toronto Star feature her opinions on religion and non-religious matters. For example, after the G20 protests in Toronto she extremely active expressing her disgust at the treatment of protesters by the police—Vosper's son was one of the many protestors who claimed to have experienced police brutality over the course of that weekend.

82 Author Marilynne Robinson, who is also a liberal Christian, critiques these sorts of claims made for the necessity of scientific proof by the new atheists and other contemporary thinkers and labels them "para-scientific" ideologues (Robinson 2010). In an article titled, "Onward Christian Soldiers" Robinson links the impulses that emerge out of the scientific method to Christian understandings of human fallibility. For Robinson this means that the essence of liberal Protestantism generates from instances and spaces where doubt and truth are conflated (see Robinson 2006; cf. Latour 1993).
around and members of the community reflect upon events that have happen in their own lives and in their community.

Vosper begins the community prayers by reminding those present that prayer has been practiced by humans since time immemorial, long before historical consciousness and religion. She explains that while they do not advocate for the existence of an interventionist higher power or a being who answers prayers at West Hill United Church, they do believe that the concept fulfills an important human need to communicate our needs and desires to others. Vosper directs the attention of her congregation to the individuals in the middle and at each side of the church with microphones and instructs those with something to share should to raise their hands. Congregants are asked to finish their prayers by indicating whether it is a cause of celebration or a plea for compassion. In the first instance congregants are told that they should conclude their supplication with the phrase "in this abundant blessing," to which the community responds, "we share the joy." Should a congregant's prayer be of an urgent or melancholic nature or matter, she should conclude, "in this our time of need," and expect the response "may love abound."

The very first time I attended a service at West Hill United Church, Lloyd, a tall and lanky man in his mid-seventies, shot his hand up excitedly during the time for prayers. Vosper brought him the microphone, and Lloyd, barely able to contain his excitement, exclaimed that he had gone sky-diving for the first time that weekend. The congregation chuckled and responded to Lloyd's enthusiastic "in this abundant blessing" with equal enthusiasm, "we share the joy!" Several months later when my father was in the hospital, I timidly took the microphone and told the congregation about my own fears concerning his upcoming surgery. In the middle of describing my father's situation, I momentarily forgot
with what words I was supposed to conclude—was it my time of need or our time of need? Stumbling over the appropriate pronoun, I looked up to the projection screens, which hang on either side of the front of the sanctuary, and read along with the text, "in this our time of need," and heard the resounding and familiar response recited in unison by the congregation, "may love abound."\footnote{For an excellent description of the community prayer time at West Hill United Church see Sarah Boesveld's article in The Observer, "Sacred, yes. But is it church?" (February 2011). Vosper's new book, Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief (2012) explores the role of prayer in progressive Christianity.}

This format of prayer is not unique to West Hill United Church. Although at times I find the prayers to be tedious and to provide an unwelcomed opportunity for certain members of the congregation to tell mundane and repetitive stories,\footnote{Towards the end of my fieldwork at West Hill United Church, I noticed that Vosper seemed to making an effort to provide a more structured layout to these prayers. Instead of permitting the congregation to speak about whatever occurred to them, she would begin by asking them to offer prayers about events happening the world, then move to their local communities, to the congregation and finally to references their own accomplishments and requests.} the prayers are representative of one of the central focuses of Vosper's theology: the creation of a venue in which congregants form a distinct community that supports and inspires its members. Community members speak of the prayers as being the most important and, for those who use the term, 'spiritually' uplifting part of the service.

Despite the title of Vosper's book, which suggests that belief is not important, discussions of what she and other progressive Christians believe, and the ethics that they attach to believing certain tenets (i.e. that they must be rationally evaluated by the individual), permeate the entire book. Indeed, it is ultimately the choice—or to state it more emphatically, the resolve—to change one's beliefs that Vosper sees as the ideal religious act. In one of her concluding passages, which Tom Faulkner notes is reminiscent of Freud's
Future of an Illusion (Faulkner 2009: 47), Vosper describes the transition that she and other progressive Christians have undertaken:

We believe that there are no supernatural beings, forces, energies necessary for or even mindful of our survival. What we have dreamt in the past have been dreams. They have enriched us and challenged us to seek out what we have needed to survive. What we need now cannot be found in these dreams. We need to dream again, recognizing that our visions, ideas, choices, and challenges, all come from within us, not from somewhere else. We are our creators, and we have the challenge before us to create a future for this planet in which love, made incarnate through justice and compassion, is the supreme value (Vosper 2008: 316).

In these concluding remarks, Vosper represents two defining points of progressive Christianity. First, the idea that what has proceeded us is no longer appropriate; like the apostle Paul who claims in his first epistle to the Corinthians to have put childish things behind him, Vosper indicates that it is not so much that previous forms of knowledge production are wrong, but more that they were misguided and can no longer be understood as correct in a contemporary context. Second, progressive Christianity focuses upon the ideals of love, justice and compassion. In both instances, as I will argue more in depth throughout this dissertation, the focus is upon the future; that is, the theological transformations currently being experienced—such as jettisoning the bible, Jesus, certain beliefs and practices—are a mere preview of the change that Christianity will undergo by necessity in the future. Likewise, the core values articulated by those within the progressive movement are framed by the desire to create a better future. Interestingly, this is a future that is initiated only by an extensive consideration and exploration of what has preceded it, specifically, for Vosper,

85 I am referring here to 1 Corinthians 13, verses 11-12: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part; then I will fully know, even as I have been fully known" (NRSV). I think this comparison is apt, although when I made that comparison in a book study at West Hill United Church the other members of my small study group strongly disagreed with me and went on to criticize Paul's theology as the cause of many of the problems that plague the church.
through a condemnation of the political, theological and ontological mistakes the church has made from the Council of Nicea instigated by Constantine in the fourth century (2008: 211) to contemporary attacks by conservative Christians around the globe on members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities (2008: 364, n.28).

I end my discussion of skepticism with Vosper, because she serves as an ideal starting point for a discussion of the current state of progressive Christianity in Canada. Many within the Canadian progressive Christian movement may despair over my focus on Vosper but it is such despair that precisely makes her the ideal point of departure for my discussion. Within progressive Christianity, and Canadian Protestantism in general, Vosper provokes a strong reaction. Many love her and many loath her. In my two-and-a-half-years of fieldwork, I have never encountered a progressive Christian who expressed ambivalence toward Vosper's message and methods of dispersing it. Thus, while many progressive Christians do not feel that Vosper represents their own views of progressive Christianity—many within the movement criticise her for 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' (see Chapter Two)—she is nonetheless an essential figure in Canadian progressive Christianity and to continuing narratives of skepticism and doubt in Canadian Protestantism.

**Conclusion**

When Tony Blair and Christopher Hitchens came to Toronto the excitement within the intellectual and CBC-listening subcultures of the city was palpable. Tickets for the event sold-out quickly and the re-sale value on the popular internet sale-site, Craigslist, was upwards of five-hundred dollars. Approximately 2,700 Canadians attended the sold out

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86 I would like to thank the members of the discussion group, 'Unserious Coffee' at Cordova Bay United Church, Victoria, British Columbia and their minister Rev. Bill Cantelon for their valuable feedback and questions about services and practices at West Hill United Church.
event. Blair, the former British Labour Prime Minister—whose recent interests in religious matters has spurred the creation of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and his own personal conversion to Roman Catholicism—found a worthy match in Hitchens, the popular author, journalist and champion of the 'new atheist' movement. The audience was largely sympathetic to Hitchens and the 'con-side' of the debate's premise: "Be it resolved that religion is a force for good in the world." While the arguments on each side of the debate were fairly predictable, what I found most intriguing was the demographic of the audience: mostly white, middle-age and well-dressed.

As I observed the audience, I was struck by how it resembled the eager audiences of the nineteenth-century Methodist revivalists Hugh Crossley and John Hunter that are so vividly described by historian Kevin Kee (2006):

Their campaigns were carefully planned, tailored to the desires of the particular audience, and then repeated six weeks later. Their services featured Hunter's jokes and dramatic stories like "The Heavenly Railroad," a tale of a young girl who boarded a train, hoping it would carry her to heaven where she would find her dead mother. Crossley delivered "song sermons": "Negro spirituals," if the mood was light, or the lament of a dead child, such as "Papa, come this way," which inevitably brought the audience to tears. The evangelists crafted themselves as celebrities and bore all the trappings of this status (2006: 13-14).

While perhaps not as emotional, Blair and Hitchens certainly assumed the roles of celebrities. Their comments were fortified with personal observations and anecdotes, at times humorous and at times emotional. For example, the entire room stood together in appreciation for Hitchens recent and enduring battle with lung cancer and many applauded as Blair spoke of

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87 I was in attendance at this debate and bumped into or recognized in attendance at least five members of the different progressive Christian communities where I conducted fieldwork. The debate was also advertised on the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity's website and a few days following the event links to the transcript of the debate, as well as a video clip, were emailed to their membership list.

88 Initial audience polls showed that twenty-two percent of people agreed that religion was a force for good in the world, fifty-seven percent disagreed, and twenty-one percent were undecided. Seventy-five percent of those polled also suggested that their opinions could be influenced by the debate.
his admiration for church workers who have dedicated their lives to the project of eradicating AIDS and HIV in Africa. As such, the audience was fixated on the prominent figures on the stage.

These two audiences, separated in time but not in interests, in many ways point towards larger trends and unasked questions concerning the secularization debate: Who is "no longer" attending church? Who does secularization affect? People discussing the secularization of Canadian society, or any other nation for that matter, should be cognizant that their theories measure the actions and beliefs of the Canadian church as a predominantly white, liberal and middle-class phenomenon. In fact, more attention needs to be paid to the influence of demographics upon these studies and the "who" question is often overlooked by both scholars and those within the church (see Chapter Two).

In this chapter, I have offered a sample of some of the figures whom I see as forerunners to progressive Christianity in Canada. For each figure I discussed there are countless more I might have selected, including the following: Kingston, Ontario's Grant Allen (1848-1899), the son of a minister who became a vocal evolutionist, agnostic and science fiction writer; or Northrop Frye (1912–1991), Victoria College's literary theorist who influenced the ways in which an entire generation of Toronto-based intellectuals read the bible by incorporating literary theory in understanding the text primarily as metaphor; or Harold Innis (1894-1952), who is credited with several advances in the study of social sciences and political economy: initially a devout Baptist, he struggled for years to promote the Christian social gospel, eventually becoming an agnostic without losing his interest in religion.
This chapter confirms the fact that Canadian Protestantism has and continues to draw from a variety of international and local sources. While I have focused on clergy and intellectuals, I hope that it is also evident that I do not believe that these historical examples of skepticism were spearheaded solely by authoritative figures. In fact, in what follows in this dissertation, I have tried to focus not on the leaders and public intellectuals of progressive Christianity but rather on the study of the development of progressive Christianity at what one might call 'the grassroots' level. While I spent extensive time with the clergy in each of the congregations that I studied for this project, I have tried to allow the voices and concerns of the members of the five communities guide my ethnographic attention. As a participant observer, to the best of my ability, I sought to be an average member of each community. In the following chapter, I will offer a detailed description of the communities that I joined and my experiences socializing, worshiping, reading, eating, celebrating, arguing, mourning, planning finances, driving to and from and participating in the general ebb and flow of each. In doing so, I aim to offer my reader a sense of my experience within progressive Christianity and to prepare my reader for the theoretical analysis that follows Chapter Two.
"The chasm dividing American religion into separate communities has emerged largely from the struggle between these two communities. It may have occurred ... along a fault line already present in the cultural terrain." (Wuthnow 1995: 371)

In proffering a study of progressive Christianity, this dissertation contributes to and is in conversation with historical and contemporary scholarship concerning mainline, liberal Protestantism. In employing these terms—mainline and liberal—I do not intend to conflate the two terms, although it should be noted that the terms are often used interchangeably by both scholars and adherents. Despite its criticism of liberal Christianity and its willingness to eventually cast off its denominational affiliations, progressive Christianity emerges out of, and is in conversation with, liberal Protestant streams of mainline Protestantism. The study of liberal and mainline Christians in North America as of late has not been a popular focus for scholars of religion—historians, sociologists or anthropologists. Indeed, despite several important contributions from scholars in the field of religious studies and beyond, Kathryn Lofton explains that "analytical scholarship" on liberal Christianity has "failed to keep apace with the glut of materials addressing its fraternal twin, fundamentalism" (Lofton 2006: 375-

89 That being said, the two terms—mainline and liberal—should not be considered synonymous. There are many within the mainline church who hold conservative theologies and growing movements within evangelical Christianity who might be classified as liberal both theologically and socially.

90 I have chosen to focus on Protestant varieties of progressive Christianity; to date I have only encountered progressive Christian reading and discussion groups at Protestant churches. That being said, many of the individuals I interviewed had grown up attending Catholic churches and some considered themselves to be "lapsed" Catholics. I suspect that progressive Christianity has not been as popular amongst Catholics because of the rich tradition of liberation and feminist theology within that denomination occupies many of the same socio-cultural trends within Catholicism.
It should be noted that this desired "glut of materials" are even more so lacking when it comes to anthropological or ethnographic works.

Within the field of Canadian church history, evangelicalism has been the principal focus and, as Richard Allen points out, studies that have looked at liberal theology have primarily been those that critique the liberal Protestant tradition by focusing on biblical criticism, evolutionism, intellectual exclusivism and the social gospel as the impetus for secularization (Allen 2008: xix). Within the field of historical studies, central studies of liberal religions include those of William R. Hutchison (1992 [1976]), Gary Dorrien (2001, 2003, 2006), Richard Allen (2008) and Leigh Eric Schmidt (2006). These authors provide important historical data and analyses of the development of liberal Christianity and the genesis of new themes, trends and core figures within the liberal tradition. In doing so, established scholars, such as Dorrien, Allen and Schmidt, have carved out a discipline with which one might begin to characterize and categorize liberal religions in North America. The category, or characterization, is one which Pamela Klassen (2011) notes must be applied with some trepidation. In many ways, liberal Protestantism is comprised of dialogically related concepts. Klassen explains that on one level modern conceptions of the liberal subject are strikingly similar to Protestant core values—for instance, the promotion of autonomy, choice, freedom of consciousness and equality. Alternatively, according to Klassen, a tension exists between notions and narratives of 'liberal' and 'Protestant'. For example, many Protestant thinkers reject the rootlessness and anti-traditionalism of liberalism. For Klassen, although these categories have validity, they must be applied with an awareness that they ultimately

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91 Recent publications in the history of religion have sought to reduce this gap, including works by Michael Robertson (2008), Melvin Rogers (2008), Steven Shiffrin (2009) and Pamela Klassen (2011).

92 Klassen follows Jeffrey Stout (2005) in making this point. Stout points to theorists and theologians including Alastair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas as key critiques of liberalism (Stout 2005: 130-31).
fail to "account for the messiness of how those who have claimed to be liberal [and Protestant] have actually practiced their ideals nor do they attend to the diversity of normative claims about self and society at issue within North American Protestantism" (Klassen 2011: xviii). Klassen suggest that these tensions can be resolved, at least in part, if one views liberal Protestantism as a practice rather than as an overarching trope directed towards religious communities that have advocated for both the promotion and the restriction of modernity (Klassen 2011: xviii; cf. Maffly-Kipp et al. 2006).

Klassen's image of liberal Protestantism as simultaneously promoting and obstructing modernity is conversant with other discussions of liberal Protestantism. For example, as noted in my Introduction, Dorrien classifies liberal Christianity as a tradition that has sought to establish a "rational and experiential" middle ground between the "authority-based orthodoxies" of conservative Christianity and "secular disbelief" (2006: 55). Dorrien credits certain intellectual figures who rose to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century as providing the impetus to construct this middle or third way for North American Christians. Additionally, some suggest that this third way has contributed to the development of what is known as 'seeker spirituality', a modality which Lofton—who, like Klassen, points to the messiness of human experiences—identifies as a "muggy third in the clean space between theism and atheism" (Lofton 2011: 58; cf. Roof 1993; Wuthnow 1998).

Likewise, in their explorations of religious trends in North America, sociologists such as Melissa Wilcox, Nancy Ammerman, Robert Wuthnow and Wade Clark Roof have provided insight into contemporary liberal and mainline forms of Protestantism. Discussing the religious landscape in North America, Wuthnow (1995) suggests that whereas in the past

93 This is not unlike the attempt on part of evangelicals to likewise create a middle space between fundamentalism and liberalism (see Smith 1998:14).
the principal tensions in American religious life revolved around the Protestant-Catholic-Jew dichotomies, more recent fissures between religious liberals and religious conservatives have been the primary interpretive model for scholars investigating contemporary religions in North America (1995: 367; see also Putnam and Campbell 2010:5). Wuthnow notes that it is the divisions between conservatives and liberals that occur within denominations themselves that are particularly interesting to this approach of studying religion in North America. In describing the characteristics of liberals, Wuthnow points out that while they are less likely to attend religious services, they do report that religion and religious teachings are important (cf. Ammerman 1997). As a cohort, religious liberals are marked by their tendency to both adopt liberal positions in moral and political debates and develop their religiosity according to these positions. Wuthnow, moreover, identifies the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement as defining moments in the development of a liberal religious consciousness and identity. In this and in other works (1995; 1989; 1993; 1998), Wuthnow provides readings of larger social trends that provide insight into the psyche of contemporary liberal Christians. His works, and the works of the above mentioned sociologists, illuminate the cultural milieu of North American liberal Christianity.

As noted above, scholars of North American religions have been somewhat reticent to study liberal Christianity and its auxiliary, mainline Christianity. As Ammerman explains, mainline churches are distinguished by their moderate-to-liberal theological and social stances. Despite the great deal of diversity within this tradition, Ammerman maintains that mainline churches are marked by the following characteristics: their common history and organizational structures; their general orientation towards tolerance, practicality and acceptability; and the fact that the majority of their congregants have been middle-class for
several generations (Ammerman 2005: 4-5; cf. Moore 1986: ix). Elesha Coffman (2008) notes in her work on the periodical Christian Century that most discussions of Protestant mainline churches have focused upon liberal theology—especially the influence of higher criticism—and its effects. Scholars interested in the works of figures such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Shailer Mathews, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich are frequently those who either have ties to theological circles or are pursuing the relationship between liberal theologies and pragmatism or political movements. While it is difficult to pin-point a definition of the mainline church, it may be identified predominantly by its moderate theology and inclusive social values—although it should be noted that many mainline denominations also contain vocal minorities who hold very conservative worldviews and adhere to traditionalist theological stances. In the United States, William Hutchison identifies the mainline as comprising of congregations belonging to what he terms the "seven sisters" of American Protestantism: The United Methodist Church; The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; The Presbyterian Church, USA; The Episcopal Church, USA; The United Church of Christ; The American Baptist Churches, USA; The Disciples of Christ (Hutchison 1989: 4-6). Reginald Bibby follows a similar pattern in suggesting that the Protestant mainline in Canada is comprised of the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, the

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94 Maffly-Kipp et al. argue that the pluralized theological and ideological values assumed in the nineteenth century and still practiced today emerged as an attempt by liberal Protestants of European heritage to reconcile the Christian narrative with diverse cultures and worldviews. In doing so, they posited a 'universalized' understanding of religion, one which resonates with the progressive Christians featured in this study. Maffly-Kipp et al. also point out that this understanding of and approach to religion resulted in an increased emphasis upon ecumenical endeavors, a focus which is prevalent today but has become a site of contestation in certain liberal Protestant communities (Maffly-Kipp et al. 2006: 13; cf. Masuzawa 2005).

95 For example, within the Anglican Church of Canada the Prayer Book Society of Canada advocates for the use of traditional liturgical practices and worship styles and the Anglican Essentials Movement (now the Anglican Communion Alliance) opposes the Anglican Church of Canada's increased openness towards equal marriage.
In pursuing a genealogy of the term 'mainline', Coffman explains that the term initially was applied to religion in the 1950s. The term originated with the advent of the railroad system and particularly the rail line between suburban Philadelphia and downtown. The north-western suburb was associated with elite, socialite families known to possess "old money" (Coffman 2008: 14). Interestingly, these elite connotations came to be synonymous with "normative"—by both scholars and adherents—in its application to religious communities because these communities were seen as well-established, moderate in their theologies and worldviews, and open to change, pluralism and secularism. Klassen questions this assumed 'normative' status often assigned to mainline churches and points out that doing so diminishes the importance of other religious movements and fringe traditions both within and outside of the so-called mainline tradition (Klassen 2011: 12-13).

The moderate theology advocated by mainline churches extends the focus of these churches outward. Traditionally the mainline church has proposed a theology that regards Jesus (and other biblical figures) as a prophetic figure interested in social justice. Mainline churches tend to be tolerant towards new ideas and societal changes and advocate a theology that is inclusive in nature, recognizing the positive contributions and merit of non-Christian religions. As Kenneth Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown (1998) explain, the emphasis within

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96 In discussing the mainline in Canada, Bibby, whose work focuses on statistics, notes that there has been a significant decline in mainline Protestantism (from 41 percent of the Canadian population in 1961 to 23 percent in 1991). Bibby's numbers, however, reveal that in the 1990s the numbers remained consistent. Bibby refers to the "mainline remnant"—a term which he borrows from United Church of Canada theologian Douglas Hall. According to Bibby, among this "mainline remnant" is a core group comprising of approximately 15 percent of mainline churches who attend church weekly. It is interesting to note the use of the term 'remnant' and its similarity to Spong's use of the term 'exile' (see Introduction); both of these evocative terms are borrowed from the Hebrew bible. It is these individuals who by merit of their consistent attendance and participation are the focus of my study (Bibby 2002: 75-78). That being said, it is important to note that within this 15 percent of regular attendees, those who might be classified as progressive Christians represent an even smaller minority.
the mainline church has been upon altruism accompanied by a mandate that one's primary religious duty is to share abundance. For many within the mainline tradition, this theological aspiration towards selflessness is rooted in a very specific reading of the biblical text that treats the bible "as a book with deep truths that have to be discerned amidst myth and archaic stories" (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 1998:30). Unlike conservative and fundamentalist Christians, the majority of those within the mainline tradition tend to view the bible as a historical document. Many recognize the bible as a source of moral teachings and propose that it is divinely inspired, but very few see it as the inerrant word of God (Thuesen 2002:39).

Peter J. Thuesen offers the most succinct definition of mainline Protestantism through what he calls the "logic of mainline churchliness." For Thuesen this logic is comprised of what he identifies as "a reasonable tolerance of ethical differences, a thoroughgoing commitment to ecumenical cooperation and an all-embracing conception of the church's public role" (2002: 27). Coffman extends Thuesen's categories by making them more embodied and noting that the mainline traditions hold an understanding of place in which the physical structure of the church as a church—as opposed to storefronts or warehouses—is

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97 The use of the term 'historical document' is meant to suggest that the biblical text be seen as an artifact reflecting the concerns and contexts prevalent during the times in which it was written. For mainline and liberal Christians referring to the bible as a 'historical document' is a way of indicating that it is neither a history book nor a directive text written by a divine being or supreme God. Rather it is often understood as a community's record of its attempts to interact with and determine the will of their deity.

98 While Thuesen's discussion is meant to apply to mid-twentieth century versions of the mainline Protestantisms, it is equally applicable to this study of early twenty-first century progressive Christianity. Thuesen's categorization draws a historical trajectory of many of the major themes present in mainline Protestantism. For example, Thuesen locates the impetus for mainline religiosity in the Protestant Reformation itself and points out that the early Reformer's, like Luther, were suspicious of authoritative ecclesiastical figures and instead promoted the individual as the primary authority on moral and religious matters, as well as interpretations of scripture. Thuesen notes that the Reformers did maintain the role of ministers for certain functions but that they did so with an emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers" that rejected the placement of clergy into a hierarchical caste system (Thuesen 2002:28). These values later developed into a theology that promoted inclusivity above all else. The third factor Thuesen identifies concerning mainline Protestantism is important, because it counteracts the "ever-present tendency to reduce religion to a quest for personal self-fulfillment" (2002: 49). This reductionist tendency is one that Lofton overtly fleshes out in her exploration of the Protestant pedigree of the Oprah phenomenon (Lofton 2011).
important. Additionally, Coffman notes that the mainline adopts certain assumptions about the sense of order and decorum that comprise a worship service and a specific network of relationships or "fellowship" between congregants. Furthermore, in terms of ecclesial structures the mainline church endorses very specific structures that encompass hierarchy, worship, ministry and social pronouncements. In sum, Coffman articulates that "understanding the mainline requires attention to ideology and practice, pulpit and pew, and especially the sinews that join them in an organic whole" (2008: 12).

While academic and scholarly descriptions of mainline churches proliferate, I can think of no better Canadian description than that offered by well-known Canadian author Robertson Davies in his novel *Fifth Business* (1970):

> We have five churches: the Anglican, poor but believed to have some mysterious social supremacy; the Presbyterian, solvent and thought—chiefly by itself—to be intellectual; the Methodist, insolvent and fervent; the Baptist, insolvent and saved; the Roman Catholic, mysterious to most of us but clearly solvent, as it was frequently and, so we thought, quite needlessly repainted (Davies 2005[1970]: 10).

While Davies description is perhaps somewhat outdated, he captures the relationships between the mainline churches, other Protestant denominations (such as the Baptists) and Roman Catholics within the small-town landscapes of English Canada at the turn of the twentieth century.

In this dissertation, I seek to draw out what Coffman calls the "sinews" that join "ideology to practice and pulpit to pew" in progressive Christianity, a phenomenon which is merely one of the recent developments within contemporary mainline liberal Protestantism.99

In many ways, the above presentation of mainline Protestantisms shares many of the

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99 Other prominent movements or trends within mainline Christianity include certain components of the emerging church, a return to orthodoxy and ancient liturgical practices, eco-, feminist and queer liberationist theologies and vital church planting projects.
identifying features scholars of the middle class point to in discussing the practices, ideologies and social structures of the contemporary North American middle class. Indeed the very notion that one is progressing towards something bigger and better might be seen as a hallmark of middle class culture, \(^{100}\) which sees itself as conjoined to the so-called 'American Dream' of economic and social success being self-directed by the autonomous individual (Newman 1999: 8).

Defining the middle class is problematic because of the lack of a uniform definition and the great divergences between worldviews, values and practices across regions, ethnicities, religious and cultural communities and amongst sub-sections of the middle class (Newman 1999: x). Indeed, the very notion of being in the middle is set upon not being defined as one extreme or the other in terms of income—being in the middle, neither rich, nor poor. Often the middle class is denoted through one's income bracket, occupation, educational status and socio-cultural practices but as scholars who study the middle class note these categories in and of themselves are not sufficient in forming a definition (Bledstein and Johnson 2001: 2, 18-19). Instead these elements are fluid at best and are often employed as a means to buttress middle class identity (see, for example, Ehrenreich 1990). Being middle class is as much about the coffee one drinks—and the ethics and aesthetics implied in purchasing one brand of coffee over another—as it is about the car one drives, one's occupation, education or even the neighbourhood one inhabits. Most prominent is the point that the selection of one's coffee brand for ethical or aesthetic reasons rests in personal choices, not ideological directives (see Wolfe 1998).

\(^{100}\) Class, unlike other identity markers is fluid and has a temporal component that is not as prevalent as rank, gender or ethnicity (although these categories have likewise become increasingly fluid). One can expect to move upwards or downwards within class structures (Bledstein and Johnston 2001: 7).
The study of the middle class is ultimately a study of cultural performances that delineate but never explicitly define middle class. As Kathryn Dudley (1999) points out, the notion of being middle class is one that "requires the unremitting performance of a distinctive moral character—one which in every community is as much culturally defined as it is economically based" (1999: 45). It is as much defined through its material accruements as it is by its systems of meaning. In this way, material items like the La-Z-Boy recliner are as important to understanding the cultural transformations of the middle class as shifting family structures, political affiliations and value systems. Material items used as a means of delineating values and worldviews differ depending on context but nonetheless enable us to understand the larger factors at play in the construction and continuous re-construction of the middle class.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am examining the ways that popular works of biblical criticism and progressive theology as texts are utilized to promote a system of middle class values that favours intellectual integrity and, what I call throughout this dissertation, an 'ethics of belief'. In addition, these values are promoted through certain reading and thinking practices that favour the autonomous self-made individual who may—along with other autonomous and self-made individuals—position him or herself in opposition to those cultural forces that are perceived as inauthentic or insincere. In the case of the progressive Christians featured in this study, the notion of being a heretic or deviant is celebrated specifically because it represents an attempt to stand against imposing forces of traditional or

101 Richard Wilk argues that the La-Z-Boy recliner can be seen as a symbol of domesticity and respectability in the middle class context (Wilk 1999: 106-7). The La-Z-Boy is perhaps a somewhat outdated example for 2012 and perhaps a better techno-centric example might be the ipad or Smartphone. Indeed, Apple's ipad/ipod/iphone products brand names in many ways can be seen as exemplifying the individualism that drives middle-class North American culture.

102 That is the notion that one cannot align oneself with a belief system known to be scientifically false or morally unacceptable.
conservative Christianity. While it may at first appear counterintuitive, I am arguing that the adoption of a heretical stance is directly related to middle class understandings of religiosity.

In presenting a careful ethnography of progressive Christian communities within mainline Protestantism, I focus upon both the interactions with these communities that I found to be significant and those that might seem rather mundane: the worship services and the moments between, casual conversations and formal interviews, times when I saw myself as 'in the field' and those instances when I awkwardly 'bumped' into my subjects of study while living my 'real life'—shopping at the grocery store, presenting at academic conferences, vacationing with my family, etc. Through offering these ethnographic snapshots in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I hope that the readers of this project will gain insight not only into the communities that I studied but also the ways in which I have viewed them through the ethnographic lens.

Of course, mere presentation/re-presentation will never suffice, and along with the necessary reflexive analysis of my interactions with each of these communities, I also seek to analyse the lives and practices of the members of these communities beyond their 'religious practices.' I was surprised to discover that my research interests led me to investigate scholarship pertaining to the demographics and characteristics of white, middle-class and suburban communities; in fact, this dissertation has been strengthened by my engagement with these research areas. Additionally, as I noted in the Introduction, the majority of the congregants at the churches I studied are baby boomers and the earlier generation that came of age during the Great Depression. While a few notable exceptions exist,\(^\text{103}\) for the most part the narratives of my interlocutors are ones that see events such as the Depression, World War

\(^{103}\) For example in Chapter Four I discuss the 'deconversion' of Thomas who at the time was in his early twenties.
Two, the Kennedy assassination, the moon landing, Vietnam and the Cold War as occurring during their formative years and thus shaping their developing worldview.

Drawing upon my interest in the demographic makeup of the communities I studied, I have been inspired by my interlocutors to provide a sense of the social positioning, age, class and ethnicity of which these communities are comprised. There is something disembodying about participant-observer work that sometimes allows these other compartmentalized aspects of the informants' lives to be overlooked.\textsuperscript{104} In response to this disembodying experience, throughout this dissertation and especially in this chapter, I have attempted to show rather than to merely tell my reader how these components of one's identity—especially my own—were experienced and performed within the churches I studied. I hope that I have accurately provided a sense of what one might call, following Bourdieu, a progressive Christian \textit{habitus} and the many ways that culture and class inscribe themselves on progressive Christians as they read, worship and converse together.

\textbf{Fissures and Fractures}

In his discussion of the relationship between conservatives and liberals, Wuthnow declares the polarization between liberals and conservatives to be the defining feature of religious interaction in contemporary North America. In fact, he argues that it is the criticism of fundamentalists by liberal Christians that ultimately reifies fundamentalist Christianity (1993: 130). Wuthnow's conclusion is certainly suggestive when one examines the ways that progressive Christians self-represent and self-identify. I explained in the Introduction that many of the ways that progressive Christians come to understand who they are is through a

\textsuperscript{104} I want to thank Jon Bialecki for pointing out to me that this experience of disembodiment is normal and for helping me think through the ways that I could pursue a more cohesive picture of the social lives of progressive Christians.
process of comparison and contrast to conservative Christianity. In examining progressive Christian writings, however, I also illustrate that progressive Christians likewise compare themselves to liberal Christians—at times seeking parallels but more often seeking to differentiate themselves by rejecting the metaphorical theological positions and traditional liturgical styles that are common in liberal churches. In this way, progressive Christians seek to construct a way of 'being Christian' that deviates from both conservative and liberal Christianities.

Likewise, one of the most striking observations that I made during my fieldwork was that not only are progressive Christian communities attempting to articulate their differences in comparison to general constructions of 'conservative' or 'liberal' but they are also attempting to construct their own versions of progressive Christianity in opposition to each other. Each of the communities that I studied, and many of the progressive Christians whom I have encountered, are extremely aware of one another and spend a lot of time articulating why and how they are different from each other.

"Gretta Vosper is trying to throw the baby out with the bathwater!" exclaimed several members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, as we met in the upstairs room of a local pub to discuss Vosper's presentation at Holy Cross a week earlier.105 This accusation was one that I heard repeatedly both within this community and others and became almost a rallying cry among progressive Christian communities in Southern Ontario, as they attempted to

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105 I noted this statement and discussion during my second meeting with the Theology in the Pub group from Holy Cross Lutheran Church in 2009. They have been gathering as a group since 2007 to discuss the church's speaker series. The very first speaker was Tom Harpur, who spoke on the topic of his then fairly recent book, *The Pagan Christ*. The title of Harpur's presentation was 'Can Christianity Be Born Again?' The second speaker was Kelly Fryer, a former pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and faculty member of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. The final speaker was John Spong, whose presentation was titled after his best-selling book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die!* I joined their sessions in the Fall of 2009 when Barrie Wilson, professor of religious studies at York University and author of *How Jesus Became Christian* (2008), presented at the church. We met up the following week at the church—the pub was booked for that date—to drink beer, eat pretzels and talk about our impressions of his presentation.
differentiate themselves from the theology of West Hill United Church’s well-known preacher, who many view as extremely radical. This statement is indicative of the tensions between the different progressive Christian communities that I studied throughout my ethnographic research. That being said, the tensions between these communities provide insight into many of the larger issues within progressive Christianity. In order to tease out these issues I have chosen to present my five field sites as complementary to each other, rather than in opposition to each other.

I concluded the last chapter with a discussion of Vosper’s controversial book, *With Or Without God* (2008), in which she makes the case that Christianity should abandon its commitments to a theistic deity. Vosper argues that belief in God is untenable for many in the face of scientific empiricism and unethical for others, given the ways that belief in God has been used throughout history as a tool of oppression. Ultimately, she contends that the notion of God should be discarded so that the central focus of Christianity might shift towards values of justice and love. While the members of the different communities I studied often contrasted their theology with Vosper, they shared her commitments to empiricism and community and worried about the misuse of God specifically and Christianity in general for oppression and deceit. While their critiques ranged from belying the role of the Christian Right in influencing American politics to a post-colonial assessment of the effect of missionary activities in the developing world, their most prominent criticisms were directed towards their own personal experiences and problems in the church close to home. As this dissertation reveals, the defining commonality between the churches presented in this study is their belief that the church—clergy along with ecclesiastical and lay leaders—has consciously been engaged in a project of deception in which they have withheld the teachings
of scholarly biblical criticism, rejected insights from scientific rationalism and ignored the social effects of modern political, economic and social liberalism. For the communities that I studied, this project of deception needs to be undermined and, according to them, the best way to do so is through collective engagement with popular texts that deconstruct previously held "truths" about the bible, theology and Christian history. Within these communities, this deconstructionism is the primary objective of progressive Christianity, an objective which brings them directly into conflict with other forms of Christianity and, as I have already suggested, with each other.

In this chapter, I offer an examination of the five churches that I studied during my fieldwork. In doing so, I look at the ways that these communities and progressive Christianity in general attempt to construct a religiosity that positions them as an alternate and heretical choice between Christianity and secular humanism, as well as against conservative and liberal religiosities. The construction of these religious modalities, in my mind, stems much from the social positions occupied by progressive Christians as primarily middle class and politically liberal.\textsuperscript{106} As many anthropologists can attest, fieldwork is often influenced by current events, especially politics. I began my fieldwork in the fall of 2008 and watched the various communities that I studied respond to the election of Barack Obama and the re-election of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper's minority government that same fall. Near the end of my fieldwork, the G20 protests in Toronto during the summer of 2011 and the ensuing accusations of police brutality hit especially close to home for one of my

\textsuperscript{106} I did not formally inquire into the political affiliations of any of the members of the communities I studied, although it came up often in conversation. The majority of the participants in my study could be classified as 'left of centre' politically-speaking. A handful of them volunteered for their local NDP or Green Party candidates and I assumed that given their common critiques of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper that many of them voted for the Liberal Party of Canada.
communities, West Hill United Church, when the son of the church's minister, Gretta Vosper, was allegedly illegally detained by Toronto City Police.

Description of the Communities

Over a period of 30 months, I participated in eight book studies, discussion groups and adult education programs at five different congregations (two United Church of Canada, two Anglican Church of Canada and one Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada). \(^{107}\) I also attended monthly pub nights for a year at one of the churches that featured a speaker series. \(^{108}\) Each of the churches were selected because they had book study and adult education groups that examine progressive theological thinking and expressed interest in popular literature by progressive theologians. \(^{109}\) Four out of the five churches identified themselves as progressive on their church websites. One of the groups was part of a more conservative congregation that provided me with invaluable insight into how progressive

\(^{107}\) The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is the largest body of Lutherans in Canada. It was formed in 1986 with the merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada and the three Canadian synods of the Lutheran Church in America. Despite its name, the church is not considered what one might classify as an 'evangelical' church in the commonly used North American connotation of the term. 'Evangelical' in this instance refers to the German word for Protestant and the title of the Lutheran Church in Germany. In 2001, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada entered into full communion with the Anglican Church of Canada. The two churches are very similar in terms of doctrines and liturgical practices, although they differ significantly in terms of institutional organization (see discussion below). While Lutheranism in Canada retains many of its heritage or ethnic practices, I agree with William C. James who notes that it has reached a point where classification of Lutherans in Canada as an ethnic church is no longer appropriate. Discussing ethnicity at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Kingston, Ontario, James writes that the community retains its German and Danish heritage as much as the local Presbyterian Church retains its Scottish identity. In other words, "as an aspect of the church's heritage, but not largely visible" (James 2011: 256; c.f. Hillis 2008). This is also very much so the case at Holy Cross Lutheran Church, which I found resembled the other churches in this study in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity. (For more information on the history of the Lutheran Church in Canada, see Threinen 2006; Hande and Schultz 1990).

\(^{108}\) Additionally, I attended speaker series at two of the churches featuring figures such as John Shelby Spong, John Dominic Crossan, Gretta Vosper, Tom Harpur and Barrie Wilson, amongst others. In 2009 I attended the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity's bi-annual conference, Explore the Elements. Several individuals whom I met at that conference generously agreed to participate in my research project. I am extremely grateful to them for providing me with insight into the many streams of progressive thinking at a national level.

\(^{109}\) See Appendix B for a list of specific books and study resources.
congregants and clergy position themselves in more traditional settings, as well as how progressive thinking is received by non-progressives.

My selection of ethnographic sites was based on the similarities between the congregations—for the most part they held similar beliefs, demographics and geographies—however, as many ethnographers quickly observe, the differences between congregations—even within denominational families—are striking (McCloud 2007: 135-166; Wilcox 2003; Bielo 2009a). My observations are similar to those of Sean McCloud in that that the differences may be accounted for by examining the personal histories of the churches, the pastoral styles of the clergy and their institutional affiliations (see McCloud 2007:136). But in other ways the differences required explanation. Time and time again, in attempting to delineate a clear definition of progressive Christianity, I found that the variations and the disparities between the communities that I studied seemed to be a core concern not only for me as an ethnographer seeking a lucid picture of progressive Christianity as it develops but also for the members of the different communities themselves.110 While at times I struggled to make sense of how the denominational structures and social histories of each of these communities contribute to their variations, I believe that my developing awareness of these differences ultimately strengthened the final results of my dissertation. Members of one community or another might find that my definitions and descriptions of progressive Christianity do not necessarily map on to their own definitions and descriptions, but I hope that they will hear the echoes of the many conversations we shared about their own

110 This tendency or desire on the part of my interlocutors to differentiate between the different communities is in and of itself further evidence of middle class notions of taste and distinctions. In my conclusion I briefly discuss the relationships between the different communities featured in my dissertation. I was surprised at how little the churches featured in this study knew about each other. Certainly all of the churches I studied knew about West Hill United Church and Gretta Vosper but they were less aware of the other churches. This is mostly likely because of the denominational differences between the churches featured in this dissertation as well as the geographical distances which while not huge meant that even the churches in the same denominational families were in different dioceses or presbyteries.
community in relation to the larger progressive Christian movement. Furthermore, as an anthropologist, I hope that they will consider the paths that they did not pursue and the possibilities that they did not entertain and, at least in part, learn more about their own perspectives through reading this dissertation.

In offering a description of the communities I studied, I have chosen to focus on some of the interactions that I had with different members of the communities. In doing so, I anticipate that they will offer a vision of how I interacted with members of these congregations and how I learned about the larger issues that animated each of these communities. Below I offer profiles of the churches, examples of some of my experiences at those churches, and profiles of some of the members of the communities who served as what anthropologists call 'key informants' throughout my research. These profiles and examples are based upon my fieldwork, formal interviews and observations.

**George Street United Church, Peterborough, Ontario**

The early Sunday morning drive to Peterborough, Ontario takes just under two hours from my downtown Toronto apartment. My route took me up the Don Valley Parkway, across the 401 highway and along the scenic Algonquin Trail. For four months I watched the leaves change and the snow fall as I sped along the highway to the sleepy city of Peterborough, Ontario. There are twelve United Churches in Peterborough and the surrounding area; although there is some discussion of amalgamating several parishes into one, few steps have been taken to bring the congregations together. George Street United Church, an enormous gothic construction, towers over the downtown core, much as it did in its Methodist heyday at the turn of the twentieth century, when the Rev. Edwin Arthur
Pearson, the father of Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, served as its incumbent. Upon entering the sanctuary one is overwhelmed by the height of the ceiling and the balcony. Prior to my fieldwork at St. George’s, I had visited the church one other time, four years prior, to hear Bishop John Shelby Spong speak. On that visit, the church was especially impressive with its pews overflowing with people, a sight which would be repeated in October 2008 when Spong once again lectured for a weekend. At each of these events there were well over 800 attendees at the full-day event, the majority of whom were over the age of sixty. The following morning garnered an even larger crowd as more than 900 individuals crowded into the pews for the worship service at which Spong preached.

The congregants at George Street United speak as individuals who have made an explicit choice to worship in this community. With twelve United Churches from which to choose, one does not get the sense that their membership at George Street is happenstance. While many of them grew up in the United Church of Canada, others found their way to George Street specifically because of the theological studies group. In response to the diverse theological backgrounds of its congregants, George Street instigated, in the winter of 2009, a small communion service led by two retired Anglican priests in order to meet the liturgical needs of those within the congregation who desired a more regular Eucharist service.

It is safe to say that encouraging theological diversity is a core tenet of George Street. The church's website proudly declares that all are welcome, and its opening lines pronounce the following: "Literalist? Progressive? Traditionalist? Skeptic? Humanist? You are welcome

111 In many ways I am indebted to George Street United Church because it was this two-day workshop that initially inspired my dissertation research project.

112 According to the church's website, in 2006 there were 303 members of George Street United Church. Available Online at http://www.georgestreetunited.ca/aboutus_facts.html (Accessed July 12, 2011).
at George Street United Church."\textsuperscript{113} The website's introduction goes on to explicate the church's vision of Jesus and to outline what it is like to be a member of George Street, warning that the experience of attending George Street might not be as familiar or comfortable as at other churches:

In a time when Christians are deeply divided, we are trying to have new conversations about Jesus Christ. Who was he? What did he really teach us? Why does he still matter today? He was a religious revolutionary who brought transformation – both personal and political – not doctrine. The original name of the Jesus movement was The Way. At George Street, we are trying to discern the way, and follow it.

That means all are welcome to our grand old building with our brand new thinking. We are a diverse group. The liturgy, while familiar, includes the congregation as leaders. We do more than speak out against injustice; we act out. There is a lot of questioning going on; it is not always comfortable, but it is deeply caring. Through our leadership, our guests, our congregational ministry, we are trying on new ways of seeing; a new perspective that we think can overcome the differences between the literalists and the progressives. You are welcome.

The website also advertizes the church's many activities, namely the speaker series,\textsuperscript{114} meditation group, children's services, special events, the church's work with local and international outreach organizations and adult education programming, which includes the theological studies group with whom I spent the majority of my time. The theological studies group is hosted by the Theological Studies Committee that is charged with the task of providing "adult re-education of our Christian Faith understanding." Facilitated by the congregation's minister, Rev. Karen Ptolemy-Stam, the study group meets on Sundays


\textsuperscript{114} Along with bishop John Shelby Spong, whose two visits to the church I refer to in this chapter, the church has featured several popular speakers. They include biblical scholar Marcus Borg, Canadian politician and former diplomat Stephen Lewis, peace activist James Loney, United Church of Canada ministers Gretta Vosper and Cheri diNovo (also a Member of Provincial Parliament for the New Democratic Party of Ontario in Toronto). Additionally, in the fall of 2006, the church organized an interfaith event called "In Dialogue – Three Faiths," which featured representatives from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian traditions speaking about the challenges within their faith traditions.
following the 10am service, immediately following coffee hour. Members of the group bring brown-bagged lunches.

After the service on my first Sunday at George Street, I stood awkwardly alone in the middle of the gathering hall on the first floor of the church, balancing my lunch bag and a copy of John Spong’s most recent publication, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. Like most mainline Protestant churches in Canada and like all of the communities featured in this study, the room was full of mostly older people, whom one could accurately describe as WASPs (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants). I definitely stood out as the only twenty-something in attendance that day. After a few moments of not being approached, I decided to make my way to the line for tea and cookies. I thought about my friends who study evangelical and fundamentalist Christians and how eager their research subjects are to interact with them. Stories of being overwhelmed and surrounded by enthusiastic proselytizers seemed very different to the situation I was encountering, as I fervently scanned the room for a friendly face to approach. A few children ran around the hall, as I looked around and try to determine to whom they belonged but no one seemed to be watching them closely. Whoever their parents, or perhaps grandparents, were they were otherwise occupied.

As I added sugar to the thick orange pekoe tea, which looked like it had been steeping for several hours, an elderly woman approached me and asked, "Are you new here, dear?", to which I responded with affirmation. She followed up with questions about whether or not I was a student and what I was studying. I rattled off my story about who I am and why I was there—like many graduate students I experienced the discomfort of outlining my dissertation topic and the anxiety of revealing too many details and leaving my listener wishing that she had not asked.
"Interesting!" my new friend exclaimed and with that she took my arm and led me over to meet Elizabeth, one of the core members of the theological discussion group.

"Elizabeth, this is Rachael."

"Rebekka," I interrupted.

"Right! Rebekka, sorry—I always get those two names confused." She smiled widely and, without pausing, carried on to explain who I was and why I was there. "Rebekka is a student in Toronto, she's here to study the theological studies group."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows and proceeded to ask me where I studied in Toronto. "Are you at the Toronto School of Theology?"

"No," I replied. "I am at the Centre for the Study of Religion."

My response generated blank looks. "It's the non-denominational, secular study of religion," I offered by way of an explanation. I do not know why I said non-denominational and immediately wished I had not done so; I was wary of scaring them off with the term 'secular' and thought that non-denominational might somehow soften that term.

"Like comparative religion?" asked my new friend, whose name I never obtained.

I nodded thankfully, "yes, sort of like comparative religion. But I study contemporary Christianity."

"I went to Trinity," Elizabeth interrupted. "I started my MRE at Emmanuel and transferred to an MDiv at Trinity." I considered doing a PhD but I was older." As she speaks I see Elizabeth is looking me over; I assume she is trying to gauge my age. "And I had

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115 There are seven federated theological colleges in the Toronto School of Theology. Trinity College is one of the Anglican schools associated with the University of Toronto. It has an undergraduate program along with its Faculty of Divinity, which is the oldest Anglican school in Canada. Trinity has a reputation for being more liberal and high church than the other Anglican Divinity School on campus, Wycliffe College. Elizabeth’s declaration that she went to Trinity is meant to communicate to me that she is a liberal Christian. Emmanuel is the United Church of Canada's largest divinity school, which is well known for its commitment to ecumenism; for example, in 2010, Emmanuel introduced a Muslim Studies certificate program within its faculty of divinity.
kids at home." In the subsequent weeks, Elizabeth became one of my key informants at George Street United Church. I appreciated how direct she—as a former Anglican priest—is in her criticisms of the church hierarchical structures and the way in which she punctuated intensive theological and ideological conversations with curse words.

Many months later when we sat down for a formal interview, Elizabeth told me about studying theology in the 1980s and how she had planned to pursue doctoral work in theology. She had been preparing for language exams and putting together a research project while working part time as a parish priest. "Life has a habit of falling apart and exploding in various ways and directions," she explained as she told me about how following her ordination she fell in love with a woman, got divorced and the church asked her to voluntarily put away her license and not function as a priest in the diocese. Elizabeth went on to pursue a teaching career. After retirement, she and her partner moved to Peterborough in 2000. Initially Elizabeth continued to commute to an Anglican Church in Toronto that was known for its inclusivity and radical theology but eventually the drive became untenable. Unable to find a church that suited her theological and liturgical needs amongst the Anglican churches in Peterborough, she started attending the speaker series and finally settled on George Street United Church. When I met Elizabeth, she was part of the leadership team responsible for coordinating the theological studies group and was one of the retired Anglican priests who holds a Eucharist service in the chapel of the church on the first, third and fifth Sunday of every month.

Elizabeth ushered me into the boardroom where the theological studies discussion group was taking place. Karen, the church's minister and facilitator of the group, smiled and

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116 Church of the Holy Trinity in Toronto is well known as an 'affirming church'; that is, a church that is welcoming towards those in the GLTB community.
introduced me to the other leaders of the theological discussion group. After a short period of small talk between members of the group, Karen had us introduce ourselves to each other and invited me to explain my project. In doing so, I told them the proposed title of my dissertation, "The New Heretics."

"We certainly are that!" chortled Jerry, a red-faced man, as he looked around the room. Jerry, a man in his seventies who had grown up during the Second World War, was in many ways the official spokesperson of the group and seemed pleased with the characterization.

"How did you come to study this project?" asked Mary-Beth, a slight woman with bony wrists, as she leaned forward in her chair. I explained to them how I had attended Spong's lecture series at George Street four years previously in the fall of 2004 and how witnessing the large crowds and the packed sanctuary had inspired me to look into the movement. "Guess you could say my dissertation project was born in this church," I told the group. "That's great!" exclaimed Jerry. "Just great!"

Bringing the group back to focus, Karen asked how I would be conducting my research and what my participation level in the group would be. I explained that I would be taking notes and participating at times in the conversation. I asked them to treat me like any other member of the theological discussion group and mentioned that I would like to conduct formal recorded interviews with them in the coming months. I was grateful for the group's enthusiastic response. Their genuine interest in communicating to me what progressive Christianity meant and how it was derived from reading popular theological texts helped shape my future interactions with the subsequent churches that I studied. From this community I gained insights into the formative and circuitous roles that texts and authors
play in progressive Christianity. As readers, the members of George Street United Church
privilege certain authors over others and form a cohesive theological stance by drawing from a variety of their preferred thinkers.

In our discussion that day of Part One of *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, we focused on Spong's arguments about the Christian narrative as presented in the canonical gospels. The opening chapters of *Jesus for the Non-Religious* recapitulate Spong's earlier works on the formation of the gospels and the historical Jesus. He argues in favour of biblical criticism and a scientific understanding of the world, at the expense of traditional Christian narratives. In this first part of his work, Spong argues against belief in traditions such as Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, his station in life as the son of a carpenter, his selection of twelve specific individuals to serve as disciples, and his performance of miracles as he travelled the countryside with his many followers. For Spong, these and other fictitious details of the Jesus story "are part of a developing mythology that must be separated from Jesus if we are ever going to see him as he really was" (2007: 20).

As we discussed these details, it became apparent to me that the group was comfortable with the concepts provoked by biblical criticism. They drew from a variety of popular texts by biblical scholars to discuss the historical context of first-century Palestine.117 Several members of the group described the boredom they felt when reading the opening chapters of *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, noting that it mostly comprised of an overview of Spong's previous works. The general consensus that week, and in subsequent weeks, was that the book represented a 'review' for most of the members of the theological discussion group who had been participating in the study group for several years and had been reading

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117 Along with Spong's works, the group discussed works by Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, James Tabor and Bart Ehrman, who are all recognized scholars of Christian origins and have written popular books examining the historical context of Jesus' world.
progressive theology for quite some time. Indeed, as this dissertation reveals, many had already concluded that Spong's quest to see Jesus "as he really was" is an outdated or misguided one because biblical scholarship ultimately provides very little insight about the historical Jesus. That being said, they agreed that the group afforded them the chance to review Spong's writings in anticipation of his visit to George Street scheduled in just under two months. The group anticipated that Spong's return to the community would—as with his last visit four years prior—fill the church building to capacity.

Sure enough, in early November the members of the theological study group were not disappointed. Spong returned and lectured to a packed audience on the material featured in *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. As he reviewed the key points from his book, the heads of the members of the theological study group bobbed especially energetically in agreement. Among the most energetic of the head bobbers was Jerry, whose admiration for Bishop Spong and excitement about the bishop's message was written all over his face. Jerry's admiration for Spong stems from the fact that, in Jerry's mind, Spong enabled him to understand and represent himself as a non-theist.

"You have to understand what theism is," Jerry explains to me as I ask him in a formal interview to tell me about his religious background. Talking rapidly, Jerry continues, "if you reject theism, then your kneejerk reaction is to call one an atheist, which is not the case, although an atheist is one who rejects theism. But a non-theist does not necessarily reject God and this is the difference that I find people have a hard time understanding."

I notice that I am nodding along to Jerry's explanation. For Jerry Christianity is divided into three groups of people: 1) the theists who adopt a more traditional understanding of Christianity; 2) the non-theists who, like himself, may or may not believe in a divine force
but certainly do not believe in the traditional Christian depictions of God; and 3) the members of a group that he, following Spong, calls the CAA (the Church Alumni Association). Jerry is critical of theists in the church because he feels that they are too slow in their willingness to adopt the progressive ideas: "The theistic person [comes from groups like] the Baptists, and the evangelicals and the Roman Catholics and many of the Presbyterians and . . .." He then pauses, as if he is about to tell me a secret, and proceeds, "many of the United Church folks are still theists." Jerry explains that he is impatient with theists because of their failure to accommodate the CAA, whom he assumes are, like him, also non-theists.

Jerry's frustration with the Christmas services at the church stem from his belief that Christmas is one of the rare times that members of the Church Alumni Association—those who used to attend church but no longer do because they do not agree with the theology—come to church. Offering a definition of the CAA Jerry explains the following to me:

They're the ones who grew up in the traditional church, as I did, almost in an evangelical church, as [Spong] did. And have grown and developed and finally decided this doesn't work. If you can't get your mind around it, how can you get your heart around it? And so there's this group that have not gone out slamming the door they've just quietly drifted away. So they do other things. They work for the United Way and they work for the Kiwanis and they

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118 In an interview I conducted with Spong in 2009 he affirmed Jerry's definition, explaining that he speaks to "people who are either dropping out of organized religion because it doesn't make any sense to them or [to those who] are closing their minds and hanging on for dear life inside the institution, but they know it's a losing battle. And so I call them the 'Church Alumni Association', I call them 'believers in exile'. They're still close enough to their life of faith that they miss it when they leave it and it's that missing that gives me the power to communicate another possibility [to them]."
work for the Food Banks and so forth and they do lots of wonderful works and they still have a wonderful life but it's not the formal 'Christian-in-church-every-Sunday', Christian life. This is the target audience that he has and I always try to have around here. Try and do something that's going to attract the CAA; get them to come back and see that Church has changed, approach has changed, understanding has changed and that it's a place to be comfortable in.

Jerry asserts that many of the members of the CAA come to church at Christmas time in order to celebrate the holiday. He sees the Christmas season as an opportunity to appeal to the CAA and to show them that at George Street United Church they would be welcome regardless of their religious beliefs and practices. Instead, according to Jerry, the theists in the church won out as evidenced by the fact that the children of the congregation performed a traditional nativity play as part of their Christmas programming and sang traditional Christmas songs.

The CAA come back and they say, "here we go. We've got the animals talking to each other and we've got all sorts of strange stars and strange magical things." And nobody really explains it. It's all the same, same-old, same-old. "Well, we'll come back next year and see what happens."

For Jerry this approach misses the point completely and any opportunity to appeal to this demographic of could-be parishioners is lost. Furthermore, the performance of the nativity play conflicts with Jerry's adoption of a progressive Christian performative language ideology that posits intellectual integrity must be maintained in performed and ritualized language acts. The church's decision to have a nativity play—replete with talking animals, heavenly choirs, magical stars and Jesus' divine birth—transgresses the ethics of belief that contends that ritualized acts in the church must correspond with their audience's understanding of what is historically, scientifically and morally correct.
West Hill United Church, Scarborough, Ontario

Opposed to the situation at George Street United Church is West Hill United Church, where the non-theist and even atheist perspectives are dominant. West Hill sits on the very edge of Scarborough, which is the furthest eastern point of Toronto. The building is an unassuming red brick construction that was built in the 1950s. According to the church's records there are approximately 145 members in the community. While a core group within the congregation have been members for many years, others have been drawn to the church primarily because of Gretta Vosper's controversial teachings about the existence of God and the purpose of religious communities (see Chapter One). West Hill draws membership from Scarborough proper but also from neighbouring feeder municipalities in Whitby, Oshawa and Ajax, as well as from the downtown core of Toronto. In fact, many of the parishioners and attendees at the church drive quite a distance to attend West Hill because for them it represents a place where they are allowed to be completely open about their controversial beliefs. Those who live too far away to attend church on a weekly basis, come in once a month for the special 'visitors and travellers' service and luncheon. Still others attend virtually by downloading videos and podcasts of the service and participating in West Hill's online forums hosted on the church's website and Facebook page. In the fall of 2010, the church sought to create a space for those members who are unable to physically attend the church, even inviting them to become members in an online/real-time service.

With little ceremonial gesture the computer was placed atop the altar at the front of the church. One of the church leaders tinkered with the Wi-Fi, the sound and the resolution. A microphone was extended to the speakers, and through the magic of Skype, the congregants waved at the screen and passed along their greetings to Karl from West Virginia,
the soon-to-be newest member of West Hill United Church. Along with ten physically present members and individuals from England, Australia and the United States, whose names were read aloud during the service, Karl, who downloads West Hill’s Sunday sermon and interacts with other community members over Facebook and other online forums, became a new inductee into the church community by participating in a ceremony that the church called its 'Journey of Transformation' ceremony. To mark his membership, a piece of coloured fabric was tied in Karl's name to the sculpture of a tree located at the back of the sanctuary that is meant to symbolise community, new life and the future.\footnote{The use of interactive technologies such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Flickr, Facebook and Skype are broadly categorized as Web 2.0 and posited as the next generation of internet and online media. As with many media technologies, interactive technologies are capable of moulding the ways that information is produced, received and communicated (McLuhan 1994 [1965]). In regards to religion, the use of new media technologies has been as influential as the advent of the printing press in terms of the innumerable possibilities for dissemination of ideas and the promotion and growth of religious communities (O’Leary 1996; Hackett 2006: 67). For instance, Brenda Brasher (2004) claims that more individuals are engaging in online religion than online sex (Hackett 2006: 70); indeed the expressions of religion can be as diverse as those of sex in its many manifestations, from searching for information about religious beliefs and practices (Larsen 2001), to extending off-line religious engagement (Young 2004; Hoover et al. 2004), engaging in online ritual activities (O’Leary 1996) and participating cyber-pilgrimages (MacWilliams 2002). Interactive technologies, as their names suggest, are characterized by their interactive capabilities, that is, each individual user is able to modify, synthesis or otherwise contribute to the design of a given platform or interface, thereby adding their own collaborative mark upon a given site. Theorists and proponents of interactive technologies point out that such innovations are inherently democratic, multi-medial and participant-oriented in their nature in terms of accessibility and reception (c.f. Brasher 2004). For example, when compared to television and radio, the scope of the internet is far more global and requires comparatively less financial resources for production. Furthermore, the internet promotes multi-access points, meaning that no two individuals are likely to encounter the information presented in precisely the same manner (see Dawson and Cowan 2004: 8).}

This special service was celebrated on World Communion Sunday (October 3, 2010) and was intended to be an opportunity for individuals across the world to participate in the service at West Hill United Church in 'real time'. While only Karl was technologically present in a visible sense to the congregation (through Skype), others were encouraged to participate in the service that day by conducting their own communion ritual at their own kitchen table and reading a special prayer written by Vosper in honour of this occasion. Those of us physically present at the church stood around Vosper’s kitchen table—which had
been brought into the sanctuary for this special occasion—and read the special text (see Appendix C for the complete reading) which begins by evoking images of communities, online and otherwise:

We are born into family. As we grow, our families grow into communities. Friends and acquaintances become connected to us through our play, our work, our commitments. The web of connections we live and share is thickened each time we care for one another, celebrate each other’s joys, shoulder burdens together, and stand in a shelter created by love.

The reading goes on to express the idea that a basic kitchen table represents spaces of sharing, hospitality and a "web of love," values which the individual and the community understood as shared. The concluding paragraph reflects upon the notion of closing geographical gaps between the church and the adherent reading the prayer through interactive technologies. In other words, from her email account or her Facebook site, the adherent is actively participating in the community, if through nothing else than through the merit of these shared values.

Today, my table is enormous because, through the work of West Hill United, I share it with many people, across Canada and in other countries in the world. And I share in the work of the United Church of Canada through that connection. Through the UCC, I share love in communities I may never visit, in countries I may never see, in dreams I may never share, and in lives I may never know. This morning, those lives and dreams are here at my table. And here, I remember, that I am a dreamer, too, and in the world of my dreams I see a world of peace, justice, beauty, and truth.
Upon completing the reading, the adherent is instructed to "take a moment to consider some of [her] dreams," break the bread, fill her cup, eat and drink and "know that you are never alone."

Several days after the special service was conducted, Bob and Winn Thompson of Saskatchewan\(^{120}\) posted on West Hill United Church's Facebook site a photograph of their own kitchen table complete with the loaf of bread and the glasses of juice that they had used while participating in the 'Journey of Transformation' ritual (Figure 1).

![Figure 1]

This process of constructing, performing and providing evidence of church membership through an online mediatory—both for those who participated in the online ritual and those who interacted with cyber members from within the physical church building—challenges and extends the traditional Christian separation between materiality and self. In doing so, this process enables the members of West Hill United Church to delineate and create a community that is simultaneously present and distant.

The extension of West Hill's presence beyond the physical church structure is reflected in both the public role Vosper plays as a guest speaker at other churches and her engagement with the media. Every Tuesday at 9am on a local radio show, Vosper debates

\(^{120}\) I am using these individual's actual names because they have posted their photograph in a public forum and therefore cannot expect anonymity.
conservative Christian lobbyist, the Reverend Charles McVety.\textsuperscript{121} Vosper has also written several articles and letters to the editor published by national and church media.\textsuperscript{122} Many of the congregants with whom I spoke during my time at West Hill first heard about the church through articles about Vosper. The public attention, however, also proved problematic for other members of the community. After the first round of articles featuring Vosper and the church were published, beginning in 2004, several of the less-involved members of the community were disturbed to discover that their church was one where the majority did not believe in God or focus upon the importance of Jesus to the Christian tradition. At that point, several long-time members left the community for other churches.\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Newmarket, Ontario}

When Pastor Dawn first arrived at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in March of 1999, the church had only been around for twelve years. The small congregation had been designated by its synod as a 'mission church' and Dawn had been selected to help the church grow and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{121} Vosper and McVety's debates are featured on AM640's the John Oakley Show. McVety is the President of the Canada Christian College and President of the Canada Family Action Coalition, a Christian lobby group that has focused its energies towards promoting 'family-values', including advocating for tougher laws for those who are convicted of pedophilia and internet sex crimes. The Canada Family Action Coalition is quite critical of the Ontario Liberal Government in particular and of liberal social values in general. The website contains documents criticising social acceptance of homosexuality, sex education in Ontario and a number of other topics (See http://www.familyaction.org/. Accessed January 18, 2012).

\textsuperscript{122} A list of news and magazine articles by and about Vosper can be found in the previous chapter.

\textsuperscript{123} Substantial criticism was levied against these members by many of the remaining congregants, who pointed out that the departed members had been happy to worship in an environment that did not explicitly reference God and other traditional components of Christian theology—namely the Trinity, sacrificial atonement and the notion of a relational God—and that they only left once they were made aware of changes that had been made to the prayers, songs and liturgy. In 2010 the church underwent a process of reevaluating and rewriting their statement of belief (called Visionworks, see Appendix D). Again, a number of members left the church claiming that they felt that the community had gone 'too far' in its theological stance. As was the case in 2004-2005, members of the congregation struggled with the exodus of their former congregants. It was a time that was emotionally trying for some of the long-term members of the community. In Chapter Four, I discuss the way in which this departure was experienced by one long-term member, 'Hedy', who has been a member of West Hill United Church since the late 1950s.
\end{footnotesize}
increase its membership. Located twenty-five kilometres north of Toronto, Newmarket, Ontario—where the church is located—is a city that has experienced rapid growth and expansion in the last quarter of a century. The church building, purchased in 1998, is a small white house-like structure that was formerly a Montessori school and previous to that was a Kingdom Hall for the Jehovah Witnesses. The sanctuary has no permanent instalments, which allows the congregation to use the space flexibly for a variety of purposes.

Although she had been instructed to focus on recruiting more members, church growth for Pastor Dawn represents building personal relationships and fellowship within the community. Reflecting on her initial work with the congregation, she explains the following: "It was sort of my theory that if they were enjoying themselves and growing that it would naturally grow in numbers by itself." Like most Lutheran churches, Holy Cross has a number of talented singers and musicians. Pastor Dawn's first task was to tackle the liturgy and to raise the issue of inclusive language. In sermons and in study sessions, Dawn led the community through a series of discussions about the theology presented within music, prayers and creeds. For Dawn, it was important that these discussions be presented slowly and deliberately; they were always intended as an opportunity for learning for both herself and the congregation.

A lot of teaching goes on. For example, when we started using different interpretations of the Jesus prayer, we did that maybe seven or eight years ago. We started during the season of Lent and we started with Greek and Hebrew and looking at the different sources in the Greek that we have of the Jesus prayers and looking at the Vulgate and tracing through all these different

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124 In 1991, the population of the city was 45,474, but according to the 2006 Census, the population had nearly doubled to 74,295. The town maintains its historic downtown centre but much of the city, not surprisingly, has a suburban feel to it, since many in the city commute to Toronto and other parts of the Greater Toronto Area for work.

125 Pastor Dawn's reference to the Jesus Prayer refers to the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). Progressive Christians often refer to this prayer as the "Jesus Prayer" in order to avoid calling Jesus "Lord" and to emphasize the human, as opposed to the divine, authorship of this prayer.
translations, the German—we have German speakers who would look at the early German and not be able to fathom what they said. I had some other older English versions so that sort of freed people up to realise that, "oh, it didn't come down in the King James version"—because up until that point their argument was do we use the contemporary or the traditional interpretation? And then slowly adding different interpretations of the prayer. So that happened over a period of three years. It didn't happen overnight.

According to Dawn, this method of dialoguing is important because it allows for each member of the community to have input into the liturgy through the worship committee.

Shortly after the church sold its parsonage in 2006,\textsuperscript{126} a conservative Christian evangelist group arrived in town. Describing the event, Dawn said that "they did a big show, they had all kinds of advertising, hundreds of people showed up." Members of the congregation were intrigued and wanted to know why they were unable to promote themselves in a similar fashion and get people excited about their version of Christianity. Having just sold the parsonage, the community found themselves with a large chunk of money. "The wise thing to do would have been to use that money to invest in building and do all those kinds of things," Dawn recalls, "but that wasn't what they wanted to do. They wanted to invest in programs." So the church began by hosting a number of wine and cheese events for its congregants.

Prior to the wine and cheese, Dawn asked the members of the congregation to have a conversation with their adult children and to ask them why they did not come to church. She smirks slightly as she recounts the wine and cheese, "it was fascinating because people came with all kinds of stories about having spoken to their adult children for the first time about God and stuff. They found out where the members of their family were at in terms of

\textsuperscript{126} The parsonage had originally been purchased in 1986. The funds from its sale were used in three ways. First, an offering was made to the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that represented a tithe (one tenth) of the proceeds. Second, funds were allocated to pay off the mortgage on the current church building. Finally, the balance of approximately $100,000 was used to finance the Rethinking Christianity speaker series.
religion." A common theme emerged that for many—both the active members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church and their non-attending adult children—an important element of their religious life was reading the works of popular religious and theological authors. Two weeks before Easter, Dawn and another member of the congregation went into the local Chapters bookstore to find out what people in Newmarket were reading. "We discovered people like Tom Harpur, Spong, Barbara Rossing's books were there, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. All of the people that we sort of suspected people were reading, but the fact that they were on the centre aisle at Chapters with a big prominent display for Holy Week, we figured that they must be selling!" And with that, the 'Rethinking Christianity' series was born.

The series began with Tom Harpur, whose recent work, The Pagan Christ, had been discussed and debated a lot within progressive and liberal churches. In order to make the event more accessible for those who are uncomfortable in a church setting, the congregation rented a meeting room at the local country club. During the event, the church promoted itself in a manner that Dawn calls a "soft sell"; brochures about the church were available but there was very little focus on Holy Cross Lutheran Church as the hosts of the event. The following Monday night, the church hosted a pub night and everyone was invited to get together to discuss the lecture. "Drinking beer and discussing theology is a true Lutheran experience," the members of Holy Cross are quick to point out—referencing the role of Luther's wife Katharina as a brew-mistress—when the topic of the pub night comes up. During the first year of the series, Pastor Dawn instructed the members of Holy Cross that they were not allowed to invite anyone at the pub night to church. "This is about giving a gift to the community," she told them, "it isn't about filling up our church on Sunday morning." The
following session a few months later, featured Lutheran theologian Kelly Fryer;\textsuperscript{127} although not as well attended, this event was an important one for the long-time members of Holy Cross because they wanted to engage with a Lutheran speaker. The third session during their first year of the series featured John Shelby Spong who has since returned to the community twice more.

In a newsletter article Spong wrote about Holy Cross Lutheran Church, the well-known bishop describes the community as a "jewel in the frozen north!" In another article, Spong shares a description of the community, the church and the service he attended at Holy Cross. He concludes by noting that "it would almost be worth it to commute to Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Newmarket, Ontario, to attend worship each Sunday. There I got a vision of what a church is supposed to be." Spong's enthusiasm regarding Dawn's work at Holy Cross is echoed during an interview I conducted with him in 2009. Talking about the state of progressive Christianity in Canada, Spong speaks of the important role that the leaders of the communities featured in this dissertation play in creating a space for progressive Christianity.

Gretta is always under pressure, people are always leaving her church. It has been suggested that she be kicked out of the United Church of Canada for heresy, or whatever. She's on the edge. When I wrote the preface to her book, I said, she's going to cause the United Church of Canada to redefine itself. And they redefine itself by kicking her out? They haven't done that yet and I praise them for that. I'll be interviewed tomorrow by the Observer which is their publication. I get to say that again and they'll publish that. I think they need to constantly be grateful that they've got people like Gretta bending their edges. She's a tremendous person and I'm very, very, very fond of her. And there are others. Karen, the pastor at the George Street Church is terrific. Just terrific. And Dawn at this Lutheran Church is unbelievable! I think that they are the signs that give me hope and I see [people like] them all over the world.

\textsuperscript{127} Fryer is a speaker and redevelopment pastor at the Renewable Church. She is a faculty member in the Nonprofit Management Graduate Program at Spertus College and teaches leadership courses at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. She is also the author of books such as \textit{Reclaiming the "L" Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core} (2003), \textit{Dancing Down The Hallway: Spiritual Reflections for the Everyday} (2004), \textit{No Experience Necessary: Everybody's Welcome} (2005) and \textit{Reclaiming the C Word: Daring to Be Church Again} (2006).
Spong's fondness for these communities is one that he shares with his many followers in his newsletters. In many ways, this bolsters the community's understanding of themselves as individual communities and as part of a larger movement.

Returning to some of the core themes outlined earlier in this chapter, the tactics that Dawn and the members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church employed in setting up the speaker series are as revealing about the social spaces occupied by the members of the community as they are about their theology. The initial decision to go to the local Chapters bookstore to find out what people in Newmarket are reading assumes a certain level of disposable income amongst their potential audience. Additionally, the idea to have the first event at a local country club instead of the church so that people would feel comfortable, points to certain core assumptions about their audience and what types of people feel comfortable in country clubs. From the very beginning their perceived audience is, at least in part, limited to people who can afford to buy the books (often hardcover versions of the texts since the authors are on tour promoting their most recent works) and are at ease in what can be argued is a middle class social setting. These points raise issues around middle-class notions of the desirability of 'likemindedness'. In my next example, Barry, a fairly well-off physician explains how the desire to attend churches made up of like-minded individuals was an important element within his own religious journey.

When he was in his forties, Barry, the son of an evangelical Presbyterian minister, gave up on church. Barry was unable to find a church in his hometown of Etobicoke, Ontario (also a suburb of downtown Toronto) that supported his liberal politics and radical theology. For years he had searched for a church that would accept his worldview but ultimately he gave up. "I'd gotten into a bad habit, I guess, when attending church to be very critical and to
think that they just didn't get it," he explained to me as we sat down for coffee one sunny winter afternoon in the basement of Holy Cross. "I am biased towards the intellectual, I am biased towards questions, I am biased towards understanding something; I am biased towards history." All of that changed ten years ago when in his mid-fifties, Barry discovered the online forum of Grace Cathedral, an Episcopal church located in San Francisco.

I would worship Sundays on the internet with Alan Jones at Grace Cathedral. I haven't listened to him for a long time, I think he's retired, there's a woman who has replaced him. But that's where I got my weekly spiritual nourishment and that's important that I mention that because that's where I had fellowship. They had a discussion group that would meet first, and it was a discussion group where you could participate online with questions. And they had very, very good people—it's an amazing webpage. That was very important; you could participate in those discussions via the internet.

I am struck by the simultaneously solitary and participatory nature of Barry's worship strategies. He self-identifies and distinguishes himself as a critical intellectual capable of finding community and spiritual nourishment only among like-minded devotees with whom he can engage in conversation and ask questions. For Barry, religious activity is not only practiced but also must include cognitive processes of personal introspection and religious exploration.128

When Barry and I sat down for a formal interview in January of 2010, he had been attending Holy Cross for a couple of months. He had first heard about Holy Cross after reading Spong's newsletter article and decided that after a hiatus of several decades it was time to return to a physical church. Barry reports that at Holy Cross he has found a community that is open to change. Drawing an analogy from his own career as a physician, Barry pointed out to me that it would be unacceptable if medical practitioners engaged with

128 His approach represents a form of online religiosity that Robert Glenn Howard identifies as "radically vernacular" in that the community "is a result of the individual choices that everyday believers make about how they deploy network media," as opposed to one that emerges out of a centralizing institution (Howard 2011: 731; cf. Campbell 2005; Elisha 2011: 165).
their discipline in the way in which he thinks many religious officials do. Echoing Spong and other progressive thinkers, he points out that a lot of the biblical criticism and theologies discussed within the progressive movement had been taught in seminaries for quite some time.

This has been around in seminaries for a long time and it just hasn't gone out in the church—I understand that there's a lot of different reasons. I was talking to a minister and he was commenting on the fact that I spend a lot of time going to medical conferences and what not. I pointed out to him that was necessary in terms of my licensure and that we accumulated a certain number of hours for continuing medical training. And not only that, I enjoy doing it because it makes me a better doctor. I am not just collecting frequent flyer points, it makes me a better doctor. And his comment was, well it's a good thing that we don't have to do that in theology: God's the same—yesterday, today and tomorrow. When I heard that I said, there's the problem.

For Barry, it is imperative that the church be open to change and innovation in theological thought. As he struggled over larger questions—like why do bad things happen to good people?—he found himself increasingly frustrated with the answers that he received from the church. "People would ask me, 'why aren't you going to church any longer?' And the answer was, 'because I take my Christianity seriously.'" Continuing along the analogy of the doctor, Barry suggests that in his experience, the church has refused to discuss or present progressive Christian thinking forcing congregants to do all of the work of theological reflection themselves. Shaking his head, he explains, "it's like going to a doctor and not getting proper answers and having to go on the internet and having to figure it out for yourself." Pointing to the absurdity of self-diagnosis Barry continues, "Imagine going back to your doctor's office and saying, 'well, I think this is what I have.' And having the doctor respond, 'Oh yeah, good idea, good thought.'"

At Holy Cross, Barry says that he has found a community that also takes Christianity seriously, a point which Dawn picks up when she talks about the effects that the speaker
series has had upon the church. As more and more members of the larger community came out to the speaker sessions and to the pub nights, a few started to ask questions about attending the church. Many wanted more discussion and engagement with progressive Christianity and popular biblical criticism and started attending Holy Cross's adult education seminar, which is held before church on Sunday mornings at 9:30am. As pastor Dawn relates, they began to stay for the morning service and then they began to ask questions. "Most of the folks who have started coming as a result of the speaker series and the outreach program have been away from church for a long time." Because of this absence, Dawn notes that they have a different set of priorities, experiences and questions.

[They] have been damaged by various different kinds of churches and are very leery of church and suspicious of all kinds of things. They have some different ideas about what we should be doing in church that are really foreign to some of our members. For example, at worship committee meetings there are three or four people there saying, 'do we have to mention Jesus so much in worship?' For some of our long-term members this is confusing. They're like, 'why do we have to deal with this question?'

Pastor Dawn is open to these sorts of questions and is willing to face controversy. For example, in the Spring of 2008, before I began my fieldwork there, Holy Cross was briefly suspended by their Synod council for its decision to ordain an openly gay candidate for ministry.129

Like many progressive Christian congregations, Dawn and the members of Holy Cross present their theology and practices as very fluid. For Dawn, this process is part and parcel of Holy Cross's location in Newmarket. She explicates, "people tend to move here for four or five years and then move on. So we always have kind of a movability. Usually new

129 In July 2012, at its National Convention the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada approved the 'Social Statement on Human Sexuality,' a motion that gave ministers the ability to preside at and bless same-sex marriages within Canada and removed all restrictions against openly gay and lesbian individuals to serve as or be ordained as ministers. The highlights from the ELICIs convention are available online at http://www.elcic.ca/In-Convention/2011-Saskatoon/July16.cfm#nccmotions (Accessed January 23, 2012).
people are coming in all the time and then people moving out." That being said, she notes that the changing demographics of the congregation can be challenging "with people coming from other denominations or no denomination and trying to figure out how to be a community with all these kinds of questions." Just as I was finishing up my fieldwork at Holy Cross, the community was beginning to have conversations about the meaning of the Eucharist service. At Holy Cross, like most Lutheran churches in Canada, the Eucharist is celebrated every Sunday. While Dawn reworks the traditional liturgy so that it is more inclusive and less theistic and atonement based, some of the members of Holy Cross find the ritual troublesome. For some, the images associated with blood and sacrifice feel barbaric and the experience of hearing the familiar words recited is a painful one; whereas for others the practice, the ritual and especially the language of the Eucharist service are so meaningful that they cannot imagine removing it from their weekly routines.

According to Dawn, she struggles to find a balance between these two worlds while being sensitive to the needs of her congregants:

Pastor Dawn: I'm thinking of one member of the parish who grew up believing that she was going to hell because she wasn't good enough and she never would be good enough. Then [for her] to suddenly realize that she is beautifully and wonderfully made and is capable of wonderful things. To be asked to go back to that fearful place where those words take her really quickly because she's heard them so many more times than she's heard that she is beautifully and wonderfully made. She has a real visceral reaction to those old words. So much so, that if I am going to use the Old Order, I warn this person. She shows up after it's over.

Rebekka: Oh really?

Dawn: Mhm. Because it's just too hard and too painful. There are other places where that pain can show up in different ways and more subtle ways but . . . I get that, where it feels like an assault. Someone is really, really smacking. The church has done that for centuries to so many people.
This focus upon 'old' language as having the capacity to transform an individual back in time to an emotionally or psychologically different and sometimes painful space is a recurrent theme within progressive Christian communities. Not only do certain words transform the unnamed congregant to whom Dawn is referring, but in our discussion we are transported to a different historical era in which Dawn notes that the church has 'assaulted' or 'smacked' people for centuries.

Returning to the theme of performed and ritual language, it is clear that Dawn struggles to find a balance between those in her community for whom the traditional liturgy evokes fond memories and those for whom it is painful. The decision to include or exclude the Old Order becomes an ethical one. At some progressive Christian churches the decision would be simple, performed language that departs from a referential language ideology would be excluded. Dawn ascribes a certain power to religious language when used in a performative or ritualized context. On more than one occasion she has explained to the congregation that certain words or phrases are "in our bones" by which she means they contribute to understandings of both the self and the community, ultimately shaping ways of being Christian. Dawn recognizes the power of these words to hurt and cause pain but also their creative potential and because of this she grants them limited access to ritualized language—a decision which she justifies by warning in advance the member of her community for whom the language of the Old Order is too painful.

Again and again, the progressive Christians featured in this study physically and temporally position themselves and their communities in relationship to each other and to other Christians. As I noted above, many people, including members at Holy Cross, described themselves in comparison to West Hill United Church and to Gretta Vosper. When
I asked Dawn about this practice of comparison, she explained to me that West Hill emerged in the public spotlight at a time when the congregation was trying to figure out how to articulate their own worldviews and theologies. According to Dawn, "They almost use West Hill as a measuring stick because up until they found out about West Hill, they didn't think there was another congregation locally that was doing what we were trying to do. So they tend to measure themselves against that, and I think that's kind of cool. You know? I mean, it can be lonely out here." Dawn is quick to point out that her theology is different than that of Vosper, especially in regards to representations of God, but also notes some parallels between the two communities. Ultimately, Dawn concludes that a lot of the differences have to do with denominational backgrounds. Comparing herself to the other denominations featured in this dissertation she states the following:

[for Vosper] coming out of the United Church tradition there is a lot more freedom. And there is a lot more freedom for me as compared to an Anglican. I don't have to deal with the hierarchy. I mean, if I hear from my bishop, it's a rare thing. And, my authority is different within the congregation than an Anglican priest's is. And even, you know, the United Church has more of a local power structure than the Anglicans do. So, I have a lot of freedom. And the final authority for word and sacrament in the Lutheran tradition rests with the pastor, so a bishop can't give me instructions. I mean they can challenge my theology but the chances of that happening are slim to none.

Dawn has spent a lot of time in Anglican churches since the two denominations in Canada—Lutheran and Anglican—voted to be in communion with each other. Her observation that Anglican churches are subject to the hierarchical authority of the bishop is one that became apparent as I began my fieldwork at St. Matthias Anglican Church in Guelph, a congregation

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130 In July 2001, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada signed the Waterloo Declaration. This declaration stated that while the two denominations remained distinct and autonomous they were now "in full communion." This relationship is understood as one in which both denominations recognize each other as true members of the catholic and apostolic church. The relationship is one in which laity and clergy of either church may practice as full members or clergy of the other. In practice this has meant that ordained ministers from either tradition are allowed to officiate in either church, including in ordinations and that they are free to use each other's liturgies—albeit, for Anglican priests they must do so with expressed permission from their diocesan bishop.
that was in the process of defining itself for their own purposes as a community and for the purposes of describing their worldviews and their needs to their new diocesan bishop.

**St. Matthias Anglican Church, Guelph, Ontario**

Brian, the interim deacon-in-charge of St. Matthias Anglican Church, and I played phone-tag with each other for a couple of weeks before we finally connected in mid-December 2010. As I described my project to him, he enthusiastically declared, "this is the congregation for you!" He assured me that there would be many members for me to meet with and who be excited to participate in my research project. A few weeks later I sat on a surprisingly comfortable padded pew in the sunny sanctuary of St. Matt's. Having been built in the 1980s, the church reflects the needs of the community to have a functional space where they can hold concerts and meetings along with their regular services. The walls of the church are decorated with banners and words like 'passion' and 'creativity,' which represent the core values of the community. To the left of the raised platform, which holds the altar, is an area with a keyboard and music stands. Above that is a projection screen upon which the morning announcements scroll.

The church is located on the corner of a busy suburban intersection in Guelph, Ontario and, as Brian told the congregation during a Sunday morning sermon, is the envy of many within its diocese, the Diocese of Niagara. There are two Sunday morning services at St. Matthias. The first, known as "Come Into the Quiet," is a small gathering of six to ten individuals without music. This first service, which is held at 8:30am, uses the Anglican
Church of Canada's *Book of Alternative Services*. The second, which is a more lively service, usually includes between twenty to sixty people and follows a liturgy that has been drawn from a variety of sources and used with special permission from the diocesan office. Having grown up attending an Anglican church, I am prepared for the congregation to be standoffish. In my experience, Anglicans are notorious for not introducing themselves to newcomers lest they accidentally suffer the embarrassment of re-introducing themselves to someone they have already met. The congregants at St. Matt's, however, do not suffer from these worries and before the service began a number of individuals approached me and welcomed me to their church with wide smiles. Located not too far from the University of Guelph, this church is familiar with the occasional church-shopping student. While none have recently chosen to attend St. Matt's on a regular basis, the congregation is eager to present themselves as a welcoming place for young adults and twenty-somethings. During the peace, Brian comes to shake my hand and I remind him of who I am and that we had planned for this to be my first Sunday at the church. Brian nods and tells me that there are several people I need to meet and assures me that he will introduce me to them after the service. I smile appreciatively and sit back in the pew preparing to take in my first service at St. Matthias.

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131 Members of St. Matt's refer to this book as the "old book" which is a significant departure from other Anglican churches where the Book of Alternative Services is known as the "new book" and the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer is considered the "old book."

132 The "peace greeting" is a typical practice in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and other mainline Christian churches. It is related to the ancient practice of greeting other Christians with the "kiss of peace" as endorsed by the apostles Paul (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26) and Peter (1 Peter 5:14). In the Anglican Church of Canada's *Book of Alternative Services* the "peace" typically takes place immediately following intercessory prayers prior to the celebration of the Eucharist liturgy. Typically, congregants greet each other by shaking hands or hugging—not kissing—and saying, "The peace of Christ be with you." This act is a symbolic reconciliation between the members of the community. At St. Matt's the majority of the congregants shorten the greeting to a simple "peace" or "peace be with you."
The singing at St. Matthias is lively and draws from a variety of Christian traditions, including hymns, mass settings, spirituals, praise music and children's songs. Because the song lyrics are projected on a screen, the music team is able to alter the words so that they more fully reflect the theology of the community and the language ideology of progressive Christianity. This practice of changing or substituting words is one that the community has done for many years. As the members of the choir explained to me, the church began substituting words many years ago when they started to focus on making the language more gender inclusive. In 2005, after the community ran several 'Living the Questions' study groups, they began to think about other ways that they could alter the language. When asked about the use of language in music, one of the long-time church members responded as follows: "Words mean everything. In a service all you have are the words. You have to think hard and deep to get around them. You have to manipulate them." The notion that "all you have are the words" contradicts other Christian language ideologies where the words used in rituals and other performative contexts—such as biblical readings, prophecy or tongues—are inspired by God and the Holy Spirit, which are the main focus of the service (see for example Bielo 2011b). For progressive Christians, however, ritualized and performed words are neither the product of or directed towards a divine being. Instead they are produced and consumed by the community and therefore the members of the community must determine whether or not they reflect the community's ideology.

An example of the types of changes on which St. Matt's now focuses is the choice to change the lyrics of the song "He Came Down." This song, a traditional hymn from Cameroon, is suggestive of the notion that Jesus is a transcendent and superior heavenly being bestowed upon earth from above.
He came down that we may have love;
he came down that we may have love;
he came down that we may have love.
Hallelujah forevermore. (Why did he come?)

The notion of Jesus as transcendent and superior is considered to be scientifically and historically inaccurate and even more importantly unethical. In response, the words of the song have been altered so that instead of using the word 'down' members of the congregation sing 'so' (e.g. "he came SO that we may have love"). Doing so puts Jesus on an equal level to the rest of humanity, it represents him as a great teacher or as resembling a prophet, rather than as a divine figure.

The emphasis that the community at St. Matthias places upon words became a central theme during at my time there. During my visit that first Sunday, I was surprised by the traditional theology and language that Brian employed in his sermon. The gospel reading was from the first chapter of Mark and recounted the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. That Sunday at the church a little girl was baptised, and in his sermon Brian reflected on the importance of baptism to the Christian tradition. My heart sank. I wondered if I had somehow misrepresented the subject of my dissertation. This did not sound like progressive Christianity to me. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. What I failed to notice at that moment, but what soon became very apparent was that I was not the only one in the congregation shifting uncomfortably. I was not the only one who was confused about the place of this more traditional theology at St. Matthias.

In the coming weeks, I met with members of the community and learned that St. Matthias was a community in the middle of a crisis and in the process of mourning the departure of a much beloved minister who had served the church for many years. Their crisis was both an identity crisis and a financial crisis. It turned out that Brian had been assigned to
the community on an interim basis because they could no longer afford a full-time minister. Independently wealthy from years of working in the field of blood transfusion medicine, Brian had recently decided that he wanted to enter the ministry. Rarely is a deacon put in charge of a congregation because deacons are unable to celebrate the Eucharist. The presence of a retired elderly minister in the community meant that he was able to both perform sacramental duties and supervise Brian as a deacon.

The community struggled with Brian's presence at St. Matthias. Because he donated his earnings back to the community, the bishop's choice to assign Brian as their interim deacon made sense, but in many ways it was challenging for him to pastor a community whose theology departed from his own. As one member asserted, Brian had allowed the "old words to creep back into the services. He doesn't realize that for some of us these words are painful." Some members of the community felt that Brian's assignment to their church indicated that they were being punished for their progressive theology. However, when I asked Philip, who is one of the church wardens, he was quick to point out to me that this was not the case. "Brian is here so that he can learn from us," Philip said. "The bishop wants him to broaden his perspective." Over and over again, I was told by members of the community that they had an uneasy relationship with the rest of their diocese and that they represented a kind of 'experiment'. Others felt that because the bishop was new to the diocese, he was not sufficiently aware of the particular needs of the St. Matthias community.

A month into my fieldwork, I attended the annual church vestry meeting, which began as many church meetings do with congregants milling around drinking coffee and eating sandwiches. "Are you able to stay?" Philip asked me, as I volunteered to help move a table to the front of the sanctuary for the board to sit behind. "Of course," I smiled, mentally
resolving to grab an extra cookie. I had by now in my fieldwork sat through enough vestry and congregational meetings to know that they were usually dull and uninteresting. Few things are worse than sitting through a thirty minute discussion of the water bill, while also listening to the sound of one's stomach growling. Philip looked concerned. "I've been to my fair share of vestry meetings," I reassured him, "I know what to expect." We set down the table and I quickly topped off my coffee and took a cookie offered to me by one of the church youth who were in charge of cleaning up the lunch.

"Can you please wear your name tags?" requested Janet, a younger woman who was on several of the church's various committees. "It will make it easier if we know everyone's names."

A chorus of "I lost mine!" was heard.

"I don't have a nametag!," a woman exclaimed excitedly. "I've asked for one before but no one made me one," she looked somewhat accusingly at Janet.

"I am so sorry," Janet responded calmly. "Is there anyone else who needs a nametag?"

Two or three hands shot up throughout the then gathered group, and I timidly raised my own hand. Janet passed me a piece of paper on which to write my name and any additional information I thought that the church should know about me for my 'file'. As I wrote my name and passed the sheet along to another one of the nametag-less attendees, Janet expounded on the benefits of having a name tag. "We have a filing cabinet at the front of the church," she noted. "You can put your name tag in there and take it out for church. You have to remember to put it back at the end of church, but it's okay if you lose it, just let me know. You can leave a message in my file!" The filing cabinet was also used by the church to leave messages and documents for the different members of the community.
A few members reluctantly went to the filing cabinet to pick up their nametags. Janet smiled, and Philip and the other members of the board, who had gathered at the head table, took this as their cue to begin the meeting. During the nametag discussion, I had failed to notice the members of the board at the front of the church. One woman volunteered to take notes and pulled out a laptop to record the meeting's minutes. The other members were rustling their papers and staring down at the agenda in front of them. The meeting was called to order and opened with a prayer by Brian. The minutes from last year's meeting were swiftly approved and the meeting commenced with the pastor's report.

At this point in the meeting, Philip revealed that there had been a miscommunication between the diocese and the church board about the length of time that Brian would serve their community. As he explained the communication between the diocese and the church, Philip's demeanour was calm and matter-of-fact. Despite his stoicism, the tension in the room was palpable. As another member of the board began to thank the various members of the community who had helped to maintain stability during the time of transition, a woman who attended the early morning service at St. Matt's interrupted. Shaking ever so slightly, she accused the board and Brian of 'speaking around the issues' and of being unclear. The other members of the congregation shifted uncomfortably. Brian turned to the woman and said, "my understanding is that my theology is different from that of St. Matthias. I am sending out my resume to other parishes." The woman shook her head. Another member of the board softly requested, "We want someone who fits our theology."

"But who decides our theology?" pressed the woman from the early morning service. A voice in the back responded, "we do, we choose people to represent us." Another man chimed in for the side of opposition, "how do you get our feedback?" Brian assured the man
that his feedback had been received and that the best way to provide it was by attending the
Vestry meeting and talking to the wardens and the minister about any concerns that he might
have. "Don't worry about me," he stated. "There are lots of churches that share my theology,
it is this church that is a challenge. It will be a challenge for you to find someone who can
minister to you the way you want," Brian concluded.

Still shaken by the exchange that had gone on, the community decided to carry on
with the meeting, which featured a variety of reports from the heads of different committees
and fundraising groups. A few of the members at the meeting were surprised by the news of
the church's debt of $89,000. They were upset by the news that the diocese was charging
interest on a loan that they had received from it. A brief discussion ensued among some
members as to whether or not it would be possible to pay. Being unfamiliar with the
Anglican Church of Canada's diocesan financial structure, a few newer members to the parish
were surprised to learn that despite the fact that St. Matthias was in charge of paying off the
mortgage for the church, the diocese, and not the congregation, owned the building and the
property. As the news sunk in, various members began to talk amongst themselves. "What
good does it do us to be part of the diocese?" one woman asked. "We could try to go to a
bank and get a better loan," suggested another member. "We don't own the church building,
we don't have any collateral," another woman chimed in response to the earlier question
about why the church did not pursue a bank loan.

Above the din of people talking, Janet piped in, "Exactly, we can't go to a bank, we
don't own anything." Pausing, she reached down and held up her nametag, "except your
nametags. You own your name tags. You can take those home with you!" Janet's remarks
garnered some nervous laughter.
Finally, the retired priest in the community interrupted and warned the congregation not to begin to think in an us-them fashion. "We have the debt and it is our reality. We are down to a half-time clergy person and we are working towards paying off our debt." He added that 2009 had been the first year that the church had been capable of making all of their payments in full and on time and that they had paid a total of $21,000 towards the historic debt. The congregation had in fact taken out a line of credit and planned to pay off their debt to the diocese by the end of 2012. And then, as quickly as the discussion and the dispute had erupted, the conversation ended and the members of the board led the congregation through a detailed break-down of their projected expenses and earnings for the upcoming fiscal year.

In the weeks and months that followed, many of the changes forecasted during the vestry meeting came to pass. By the beginning of March, Brian had found a new position in a nearby parish that better matched his theology. Just in time for Easter, Elizabeth arrived as the new rector. Having grown up in Hamilton, Elizabeth's appointment to St. Matthias was a homecoming of sorts. Her father had served as an Anglican priest in the diocese for sixty-three years and she had completed her undergraduate degree in Sociology at University of Waterloo in the neighbouring town of Kitchener-Waterloo. Elizabeth completed her theological training at the Vancouver School of Theology and was ordained in 1995, after which time she became a priest in Saskatchewan. In 2000, Elizabeth moved to the Diocese of Umzimvubu, South Africa where she served as the only female priest. During her time there she advocated for HIV/AIDS education and served South Africa's only multiracial Anglican congregation. In conversations over coffee, Elizabeth speaks to me of her time in South

133 The mission statement for the church that Brian eventually moved to includes the directive to enter "people into a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ our Lord" as a primary goal.
Africa as life-changing. After returning to Canada, she struggled with the idea of parish ministry and suffered from "culture shock." In 2006, after many conversations with the bishop she agreed to become a minister in her father’s former diocese.

In many ways, the move to St. Matthias was fortuitous for both Elizabeth and the congregation. The members of St. Matthias were thrilled to have a minister who supported and addressed their concerns about language and progressive theology. "She's familiar with the 'Living the Questions' program," Philip explained to me when her hiring was first announced to the congregation. Additionally, Elizabeth has challenged this community to be more inclusive and inter-cultural in their outlook. In her services, she often draws upon her own experiences in and traditional stories from Africa to illustrate points. From Elizabeth's end, St. Matthias proved to be a welcoming and inclusive space for both her and her partner Joan, as they settled into their first year of marriage. That summer, members of the congregation joined together to celebrate the Blessing of Marriage between Elizabeth and Joan at St. Matthias. And as she giddily danced down the aisle past a sea of smiling faces during the Recessional Song "One Love" by Bob Marley, I could barely remember the community that seemed so divided only a few months earlier.

*St. Peter's Anglican Church*134

Built in the 1870s, St. Peter's boasts a breath-taking sanctuary with modern pews and stained glass windows installed to commemorate some of the church's founding families. The church building itself, which was built next to the original chapel in the 1960s, provides ample meeting and gathering spaces. On the same nights that we gathered for the book study,

134 Once again, in order to preserve the privacy of this community, I have elected not to use the real name of the church, its location or the names of the church's ministers.
an Alcoholics Anonymous group and an art therapy group met separately in different areas of the church complex. The book study group hosted at St. Peter's was small. On any given night, anywhere between four and eight of us would meet. The book study which met every other week to read and discuss Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*,\(^\text{135}\) lasted from September 2009 to April 2010. Following Borg's book, we focused on a DVD and book study guide written by Tim Scorer, a United Church minister from Vancouver who formerly ran the Naramata Centre, a retreat education centre of the United Church of Canada. The study group at St. Peter's is organized and facilitated by Stan and Mary-Ellen, the church's two ministers. The study group was a homogeneous group comprised of individuals who might be characterized as young-retirees; like most of the participants in this study, they were white, middle-class people who had been raised in the Christian tradition. While the members of this study group appeared to be similar demographically-speaking in terms of socio-economic status, culture, religious background and age, I soon recognized their theological diversity, in both beliefs and practices.

Each week, our intimate group gathered chairs in a circle just outside the church's cathedral-style sanctuary. Without exception, we began by lighting a candle and finished by reciting a version of the Lord's Prayer together (see Appendix E). In the intervening time that we spent together, Stan and Mary-Ellen led us through different activities and discussions in which we were asked to share personal stories from our pasts and to talk freely about our deeply-held beliefs, our dreams for the future and our fears. In doing so, Stan and Mary-Ellen

\(^{135}\) As I note elsewhere in my dissertation, it is important to point out that among most progressive Christian communities this book is considered to be an introductory text for progressive Christianity. Many of the progressive Christians whom I interviewed for this study are critical of Borg, claiming that "he does not go far enough" in his theology. At Holy Cross Lutheran Church in the fall of 2010, the adult education group re-read Borg's *Heart of Christianity* so that they could re-familiarize themselves with the basics. During the sessions, Dawn outlined for the community how they had moved past Borg's perspective en-route to their new one.
sought to create a space where everyone felt comfortable sharing. Several outspoken and opinionated members of the group were very familiar with Borg's works, as well as those of other popular religious and philosophical authors.

Perhaps because of the presence of certain outspoken members, Stan and Mary-Ellen made a point of insisting that everyone—including me—be given ample time to share their thoughts and reflections on the book. Often Stan would pause and say, "is there anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak?" Linda was often reluctant to participate fully in conversations. In an interview she explained to me that she found Borg's book to be interesting but that it took a few chapters before she got a sense of why the book was important or what it was really about. Having not pursued post-secondary education, Linda confided in me that she often felt like she did not possess the vocabulary with which to discuss the book. Comparing herself to some of the other members of the book study, she outlined the following:

I feel like I am in kindergarten compared to some of the knowledge [possessed by others]. In that group, a lot of the men had read different books by different authors and by the same author and they were very well-versed in their opinions about those authors. I am just barely getting started, I am in kindergarten.

Prior to participating in this book study, Linda had been part of a women's only book discussion group that read Tina Beattie's *The Last Supper According to Mary and Martha*, which imagines the life of Jesus from a woman's perspective. Linda felt much more comfortable speaking about the historical biblical context by relating to the women in that time period and comparing her own experiences as a woman to theirs.

When I asked about the effect that Borg's book had upon her theology or her worldview, Linda excitedly responded: "This book study was really far out for me!" she began with her eyes growing wide. "I hadn't given any conscious thought to some of the
different attitudes. I was brought up really traditionally. This book opened my eyes." Despite her difficulty with Borg's book and her traditional upbringing, Linda thought that the book reinforced some of the ideas that she had formed previously. "This book gives you permission to question, delve and grow. I found that part of it very promising, very exciting," she explained when I pushed her for details. Linda's comparison of herself to the men in the book study at St. Peter's and her admission that she feels like she is in Kindergarten is revealing of the ways cultural practices and discourses concerning gender have the potential to emerge within the communities featured in this dissertation. In comparing herself to the men in the group whom she perceives to be far more advanced intellectually, Linda participates in a gendered discourse that Catherine A. Lutz (1990) identifies as a "rhetoric of control" through which emotional experiences of women are thought of as irrational, subjective and dangerous as opposed to men who are presented as rational, objective and in control (Lutz 1990: 69-70). While Linda is unable to contain her emotions—she weeps softly when her favourite Psalm is read—the men in the group are depicted as adopting a rational cognitive stance brought about by their increased knowledge and familiarity with the topic.

The first day that we gathered for the book study, we were asked to position ourselves on an imaginary line in terms of where we stood when it came to certain teachings of the church. Stan and Mary-Ellen explained to us that those of us who held very liberal positions should stand at the north end of the room while those who were more conservative should stand towards the south side of the room. When I asked Linda about that instance she explained to me that, having completed the book study, her position may have changed slightly. Linda, who had stood primarily at the south end to mark her more conservative theological outlook, now saw herself as standing in the middle. The major impact of reading
Borg's book for Linda was that it changed her perspectives on different sexual orientations and interfaith dialogue. Although neither of these topics are directly covered in Borg's book, having the opportunity to ask questions and explore her doubts provided Linda with a venue to question many of the social dimensions and beliefs of her religious tradition.

The notion of physically positioning oneself theologically is a common theme within progressive Christianity. For example, during a Question and Answer period at his workshop at Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Bishop Spong used the analogy of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea to explain his role as a leader within the progressive Christian community. "We are all more or less moving in the same direction. As a pastoral figure, I need to make sure that no one diverts too far off of the path." Some are moving too quickly and I need to remind them to slow down and wait for the group, others are too slow and might get caught by the waters when they advance; I need hurry them forward." This image of physically or chronologically moving forward is a striking one because it assumes that one's current position is temporally bounded. Linda, sees herself as in Kindergarten, but assumes that eventually she'll move on to Grade One.

In comparison, while Linda experienced a great deal of change and transformation in the St. Peter's book study, another participant, Ray, found the group to be tedious at times and elementary in its approach to the topics of discussion. During the same session that Linda positioned herself on the conservative end of the spectrum, Ray decided that he had grown tired of our swapping places and instead went out to have a cigarette—a symbolic rebellion of sorts. When I asked Ray about his impressions of Borg's book, he laughed and quipped,

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136 While many like Jerry would agree with Spong's description of himself as the figure responsible for making sure that everyone stays on the same path, others within the progressive Christian movement feel that Spong is holding the movement back. In conversations and in my interview with him, Spong acknowledges that progressive Christianity is surpassing his own theology and points to Vosper as someone to whom he is passing the torch.
"it's a good book to choose if you don't want to offend anyone. And if you don't want any offense to be broached." In the fashion that I had come to expect from Ray, he expressed that while it was a good enough book and certainly served the purpose of introducing historical criticism and more liberal interpretations to the unfamiliar, he found that, for the most part, the text lacked depth: "He's got a real strong sales pitch all the way through it. But it's really to me, just the same story, new clothes." Ray described his frustration with Borg's argument for the necessity of a new middle-ground approach to Christianity. "The emerging paradigm that he keeps referring to began to grate on me about half way into the book. You know? Because the paradigm is not emerging, the paradigm has been around forever."

Having been raised Catholic and attended a Catholic boys school in New York, Ray has fond memories of the brothers, whom he describes as "cigarette smoking, beer drinking, tough ass guys from the tough streets of New York and Boston," and the kindly priests, like Father Small, who took Ray under his wing when he was a teenager.

I was closely involved in the church, I said Mass probably one week a month for years. I had my favourite, Father Small and I were buddies. And if Father Small said, "you're gonna walk through that blazing snow storm and see what's on the other side of that mountain," I would have done it. He just was a great guy. I would be in church, on my knees, out there with Father Small for seven o'clock Mass no matter what the weather, what the day, I never missed a beat. I found it incredibly magical, the church was an old church, ornate and beautiful church with marble altars and all the icons. It was all in Latin of course. I understood Latin so it was not like I was mumbo-jumboing, I knew what I was saying. That just transported you to a special place, it was a special language, a sacred language, by then a dead language. I found it enthralling and I swallowed the dogma hook-line and sinker because the nuns made sure that you got that real good.

This notion of understanding what one is saying—for Ray, the fact that he knew Latin—is a classic post-Reformation position and an important one within progressive Christianity. While I suspect that Ray would not self-identify as a progressive Christian he very clearly
holds many of the same values when it comes to beliefs, practices, language ideologies and ethics.

From his time spent in the Catholic school system, Ray inherited a deep and abiding respect for studying religion and theology, although upon taking a cultural anthropology course at university, Ray soon lost his faith in traditional Christian teachings and doctrines. At that point, Ray reports that things began to unravel and, in the 1960s, like many in his generation, Ray turned to Eastern religions as an alternative: "I went through Buddhism, different schools, Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan, Zen. I got really big into the Sufis for a while because they're a lot of fun and no nonsense either. They kind of remind me of the brothers. I like the whole scene a lot."

Ray's interest in Buddhism is one that he has pursued throughout his life. During our discussions of other religions, Ray set himself up as the resident expert on Buddhism to the extent that at one point during a conversation about other religions, Mary-Ellen turned to Ray and asked him if he was a Buddhist. Grinning widely, Ray was obviously pleased with the categorization but told her that one cannot really be Buddhist in the way that she was thinking of it. Later in a private conversation, Ray reflected upon Mary-Ellen's question.

Fundamentally, I guess, if you were to ask me if I were a Christian, I would have to say that I grew up that way. That's not a definite answer because there is no definite answer. There is lots I'm not happy about. The root story for instance is one. I don't like religion in particular. You were at the meeting, we were told to raise our hands if we knew any people of different faiths. And a person said, "are you a Buddhist." And I said, "no." And I said, no, not because I don't have a feeling for Buddhists because Buddhism like Catholicism has become or created a human frailty thing, nothing that the Buddha actually discovered in his moment of Enlightenment. He tried to explain it, I have a book with me that explained it as well as anything I've ever seen. So I wouldn't be a Buddhist because I wouldn't be practicing Buddhism. Am I a Christian? Well, like I said, I was born that way; I was brought up that way. But do I practice Catholicism or Christianity? Do I go to church? No! Do
I want to? No! Do I believe in the doctrines and stuff? No! I don't! I think it's off the rails.

Several points of interest in Ray's explanation resonate with many of the trends that I encountered in my fieldwork.

First and foremost, Ray differentiates between the religious tradition—as it was practiced or experienced by its original founding figures, Jesus and the Buddha—and how it is currently and has historically been practiced. Ray's emphasis on the *ism* in Buddhism and Catholicism suggests that he perceives them to be dramatically different things from what their original founders had intended. Buddhism, according to Ray, has become a thing of "human frailty" rather than the experience the Buddha had at the moment of his Enlightenment. Related to this point is the book about Buddhism, *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*, which Ray brought with him to our interview. For Ray, the book serves as a means of establishing authority and making sense of his own beliefs and practices. At one point during our interview, after I asked him about his beliefs—i.e., whether he believes in something we might call 'God' or whether or not he is an atheist?—he explains to me that neither of those categorizations apply to him because he cannot "conceive God." Confused by his answer, I ask him to clarify, at which point he opens the book and reads to me a passage that he had marked for our interview.

The heart of Gotama's awakening lay in his equivocal embrace of contingency. "One who sees condition arising," he said, "sees the Dhamma; and one who sees the Dhamma sees conditioned arising. He recognised how both he and the world in which he lived were fluid, contingent events that sprang from other fluid, contingent events, but that *need not have happened.* Had he made other choices things would have turned out differently. "Let be the past," . . . "let be the future. I shall teach you the Dhamma: when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does

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137 While Ray attends the book study and the church's men's pub night he rarely attends worship services. I asked if I could attend the men's pub night but was not invited.
not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases" (Batchelor 2010: 131).

Ray admits that he had to read through this passage several times to comprehend it fully and suggests that I will likewise need to look at it more than once to grasp how it is related. It seems that, for Ray, the fluidity of his religiosity, a Christian, with, among other things, Buddhist beliefs but not practices, is negotiated through the specific understanding of Buddhism that he has received from the texts he has read.138

Another key element at work here is Ray's point that despite not believing in any Christian doctrines, practicing any Christian rituals or attending church, he is in fact a Christian primarily because he was raised that way. This sense of possession and ownership of a Christian identity is one that I encountered repeatedly during my time spent with the various progressive Christian communities featured in this dissertation. When asked why they maintain the moniker 'Christian', my interlocutors respond that Christianity is from where both they and their churches come. In Chapter Five of this dissertation, I explore the ways in which progressive Christians imagine a future in which they will "no longer" be Christians but, for the time being, the progressive Christians featured in this study feel that having been raised Christian is reason enough to use the locution in describing their religious identities.

Ray interpreted Borg's book as an invitation to return to church, but not necessarily an invitation he was eager to accept. "That's all very nice and it's very welcoming," he stated. "And we need more people with broader views and less dogmatic views, certainly. But we really have some root-cellar tidying up to do in the whole thing of Christianity. I think we're

138 For example, in an email that Ray sent me a few days later he clarified what he meant by employing the term post-modernsecularchristianbuddhisttoltecmathamacallit (that is, post-modern secular Christian Buddhist Toltec What-chama-call-it) to describe his religious identity. "Tolte" refers to a Mesoamerican culture that predates the Aztecs.
so far off the message of Christ, if we can find out what he said or didn't say. Referring to whether or not it would be possible for the church to clean up its proverbial root cellar, Ray notes, "there's enough in the New Testament to get a sense of him. We're nowhere near that."

Compared to the other churches featured in this study, the members of the St. Peter's book study group seem more interested in determining who Jesus was. Members of the other churches I studied—especially West Hill—identify this practice as an introductory step towards progressive Christianity. Indeed, as I argue throughout this dissertation notions of belonging are intermingled amid a rigorous investigation of the past—both the biblical narrative and the individual's own story—and uncertainty or ambiguity concerning the future. Out of these notions emerges a progressive Christian habitus that is tangible in its orientation in terms of adopting terms that physically and chronologically position the individual or the community. For example, Ray's point that "we're nowhere near that" is suggestive of physical and chronological proximity.

While Ray views Borg's book as an invitation to return to church and Linda understands it as an introduction to far-out ideas, others like Paul see it as an opportunity to have honest discussions about theological ideas that they are not normally permitted to have in a church setting. Having been raised in the Anglican Church, Paul drifted away from church as a young man and married a woman who attended a United Church. He attended church with his wife after they had their first child but more so out of duty than out of any desire to be religious. In 1977, after they had been married for ten years, Paul and his wife attended an evangelical Anglican retreat weekend for married couples. Describing that event, Paul said more than once to our group, "I was a reluctant participant, I tell you, but I came

Ray is pointing to the fact that historical biblical criticism, such as that done by the Jesus Seminar, renders it very difficult to determine what parts of the bible are historically representative of Jesus' words and deeds (see my discussion in Chapter Three concerning the Jesus Seminar).
out of that with an absolutely transformed view about my marriage and a completely reinvigorated view about faith." From that point on, Paul and his wife were active members of the Anglican Church. Through his renewed commitment to his faith, Paul began leading bible studies and became interested in examining the bible. Initially Paul took the biblical text to be the literal word of God, but he articulated that his background as an engineer is the reason that he had a hard time figuring out how the text could possibly be scientifically and historically accurate. Paul struggled for many years, reading texts by authors such as Borg, Spong and Crossan in an attempt to make sense of his faith and align his experiences with his beliefs.

Paul does not attend St. Peter's and only learned about the group over the Christmas holidays when Stan described the book study in his holiday newsletter/greeting card. Instead, Paul attends a different Anglican church in town, which he describes as "small-c conservative." Paul enjoys attending this church because he likes the traditional worship styles and the fact that it is representative, theologically-speaking, of his wife's views. When I asked him to describe his own religiosity, Paul recounted:

I would say I'm kind of a closet progressive Christian. And the reason I say 'closet' is, I know for instance, some of the thoughts [I have] would be quite upsetting for my wife who is quite the traditional believer. I have no wish to upset her and it's hard for me to say—I'm not sure if I'm saying the right thing—but within our own parish, it is pretty traditional. Maybe there's a bunch of other people there like me, I don't know. My own personal faith, I'm definitely a progressive Christian.

While Linda is representative of someone to whom progressive Christian ideas are new and Ray perceives the movement as "the same story [in] new clothes," Paul, as a 'closet progressive Christian', is representative of a movement of individuals who are intrigued by
progressive Christianity but cannot find or are not interested in attending progressive Christian churches.

As mentioned above, Paul leads bible studies and other discussion groups at his home church. At one point during a Lenten study, the bible studies group questioned the meaning of the term 'Son of Man' in the New Testament. As he remembers the debate, Paul's voice grows soft. "There was an individual there who was very, very sincere," he recalled, "very serious about his faith and so passionate that he tends to be overpowering. He'll make categorical statements in such a forceful way that it tends to shut down conversation." Noting that he was not sure whether or not this man was aware that he comes across this way, Paul described the man's insistence on the Son of Man passages being read in order to declare that Jesus was the Son of God. "He was going on and on about Son of Man in kind of a literal understanding. I shouldn't have allowed it to happen but it was irking me, so I finally introduced the idea that the Son of Man phrase goes back to Daniel and the Judaic period." Paul paused to ensure that I was following him, "it can have a number of understandings. Certainly in Judaism it was not seen specifically as a literal 'Son of God'. This was the connection that he was making, Son of God." For Paul the problem was not necessarily that the man was endorsing a specific interpretation of the text, but rather that he refused to allow other interpretations—especially those grounded in historical criticism—to be considered. "And so I offered this as a 'by the way are you aware'—meaning the group at large—that there were other understandings of this particular phrase that were around a long time before Matthew wrote them in his gospel?" Again, Paul is not interested in the actual interpretation but rather in the methods that are employed in generating the interpretation.
Returning to the story, Paul continued, "the next day I got a phone call from another fellow [from the group] and we got into an awful discussion. He asked me some questions and I told him the truth and that was quite upsetting to him." For Paul the end results of the conversation were awful because the man decided that he would not participate in any groups that Paul ran at the church. "He said to me, 'well, I respect you for who you are and your beliefs but I must tell you that I won't be participating in anything else that you lead at the church.'" I expressed my disbelief at the man's unwillingness to participate in future studies. Paul sighed and related, "this is anecdotal, but I have found it's such a sensitive issue with some people. I haven't figured out ways to say things that might be meaningful to me in ways that won't be upsetting for them. So I must say, I tend to sit back and pick my times pretty carefully."

The notion of sitting back and picking one's battles is a common practice, according to many of the progressive Christians featured in this study. Many whom I met at conferences, workshops and special speakers' events told me stories similar to one that Paul recounted. While some made use of these special events to connect in-person and others met up through various websites, Facebook groups or church discussion forums, others only connected through reading—a process which I will argue, in the next chapter, enables the construction of an imagined community of readers (Anderson 1983; Bielo 2009a). Indeed, often the authors of these texts become the figure-head or representative of these imagined communities, to whom many progressive Christians turn for answers to their personal and theological troubles. For example, during one of the sessions at Holy Cross Lutheran Church,

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140 While I did not question Paul's use of the term 'the truth', I am assuming that he understands truth to be an interpretation of the bible formulated through biblical criticism.
a man from a local Baptist church asked Bishop Spong what he could do about being the only progressive Christian in his church.

"You're probably not the only one," Spong replied.

"It feels like I am," the man answered.

Spong paused and a look of genuine concern came over his face. "Be an uncomfortable voice for change," he said looking the man directly in the eyes. "There are so many people across North America who are the only progressive voices in their churches. It's difficult for them," he told the audience. "It is a lot easier to join a progressive church and be fed. But those who chose to stay in the traditional churches, those who act as an uncomfortable voice in conservative congregations, they're the ones who get to really make change happen."

In my conversation with Paul, I was struck by the similarities between his own concerns and those of the man who had asked Spong for advice a few months earlier. Halfway through our interview, Paul turned the conversation around and started asking me questions.

Paul: You might be able to help me. I'm trying to help people prepare devotions. I said, well Google 'devotion' on the internet and you get a million pages. So someone did this, and I've done it and then, in due course she wrote me and said, you know these are all too evangelical for me. That's the Christian Right, this personal relationship with God and you're going to be saved. I couldn't find anything else. So my question to you is, are you aware of some websites that one could get either bible study material or devotional material of a more progressive or liberal, as opposed to an evangelical, way. I'm wading through fourteen million hits, I can't.

Rebekka: Well if you're looking for bible study material there is the 'Living the Questions' program, have you looked at it?

Paul: I haven't looked at it but I'm familiar with it. I just haven't forked out the money for it yet.
Rebekka: Yes, it's expensive.

Paul: That's through the progressive Christianity website.

Rebekka: Yes, it's fairly—it would make what we did with Borg seem fairly conservative, I think. It's sort of supposed to be based on the Alpha program. But it's an extensive engagement with biblical criticism and features people like Karen Armstrong and Spong and Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Elaine Pagels and all those thinkers.

Paul: You said that it makes our conversation look conservative. The conversation that we had in the study group or the 'Living the Questions' material is conservative?

Rebekka: I would say that Borg's work is much more—he's very obviously trying to walk a thin line and be as inclusive as possible to everyone and I would say that's not as prevalent in the 'Living the Questions' programs. They sometimes call it Alpha for liberals.

Paul: Okay. Well, you know Spong is right out there on the edge. I do understand, Borg tries to bridge the gap whereas Spong says, "this is where I am and I'm not too worried about the rest of you."

Rebekka: Exactly.

Paul: What about devotions? I'm trying to get people, when we have small groups that meet on the advisory board, to spend ten or fifteen minutes at the beginning of the meeting on some sort of scriptural or devotional thing. Getting people to up the curve so that they can lead it. Whether it's reading something or preparing something and having a question. At this juncture I'm not particularly concerned but, I'm looking for material like that. That's why I sent this person to Google devotion. When she wrote back and said the problem she had, I knew it because that's the problem I had. I'd done it several times before myself and then I get frustrated. I can't find anything that is less Right-Wing. It sounds like 'Living the Questions' is way on the other side of the perspective. I'm going to pursue that myself and look into, you know, some of that. But I'm not—that's not the material I'm thinking of to help people who say, "where do I go to find devotional material that isn't quite stamped with this evangelical style approach?"

Rebekka: I don't have an answer for you, but I will send an email to a couple of people who I know who might have answers for you and email you and let you know what they suggest. I know a lot of liberal Christian ministers who would maybe have information about that. Devotions aren't really something that I've spent a lot of time researching. But I know people who will have those answers so I will find out and get back to you on that, if that's helpful.
Paul: That would be great. The way I get around it is I just take one of my Study Bibles—almost all of them again tend to be more evangelical. Some of them have some pretty good summaries either on a topical basis: righteousness, justice, compassion, things like that. And sometimes [they have] some interesting questions alongside texts. So I'll pick a text or a topic in the text and just make up my own questions, often using that material as a bit of a guide and I'll just frame the questions in a way that appeals to me. That works, it's fine for me, a study bible. The more familiarity you have with the bible the easier something like that is. I find you know, suggesting that to people tends to fall on deaf ears simply because they don't have a study bible, or if they have one they wouldn't know really how to go about it. I will continue to explore and try to understand more about progressive Christianity. I think one day I'll go down and see Gretta Vosper, one of her services or several of her services.

Rebekka: Have you had a chance to read her book?

Paul: I haven't. I have it but I have not read it yet. But it's on my list to do shortly. So yeah, I guess that's—I would prefer to be with like-minded people. I don't find my friends at [my church] like-minded in the way that we've been talking about. But it's not that I want to leave. Because of my wife and, you know, my long time association with the parish. I would much prefer to help individuals broaden their own experience of God and wherever that takes them. I could do that here and I'm very happy doing that here.

I have included these lengthy passages from my taped discussion with Paul because I believe that they offer insight into the ways in which one accesses the progressive Christian movement. Often communities find each other and study resources through word-of-mouth. In Paul's case he uses evangelical study guides as a template and attempts to alter them in order to conform to his theology. In this instance, I serve as a resource for Paul and my promise to help him track down more liberal devotional products is one that I am still pursuing. As much as Paul served as one of my key informants, I have likewise played this role for him in his pursuit of progressive Christianity.

Unlike many of the progressive Christians I have met throughout this study, Paul has more experience with conservative Christianity and does not necessarily desire to see others become progressive Christians. Instead, he embarks upon projects that strategize to introduce
progressive Christian thinking in ways that are, as Paul said, meant to "help them broaden" perspectives rather than dramatically change theological leanings. I suspect that for Paul and others who see themselves as progressive Christians but do not attend progressive Christian churches, this process of negotiating practices, theology and community with each other is one that is performed as a fragile balancing act. And while progressive Christians might worry about what others say or think, their frustrations are not enough to compel them to seek out different communities. In Paul's case, he is a leader within his Anglican church, enjoys the worship services and liturgical practices and shares with his wife many friends in that community, all of which are compelling reasons to not abandon his community over theological differences.

The question of how many 'closet' progressive Christians there are is outside the scope of this dissertation which examines the development of progressive Christian thinking within church communities that are actively seeking to engage with the movement. At progressive Christian conferences and workshops as well as online I have met many individuals who recounted to me that it was difficult for them to be open about their beliefs in their home congregations and with their families. Amongst the churches that I have studied there are several married couples who have sought to investigate progressive Christianity together. In some instances there is one who is more committed to the movement than the other. For example, in Chapter Five I discuss Jodi who along with her husband are quite active in promoting progressive Christianity at St. Matthias Anglican Church. While Jodi's husband is also committed to progressive Christianity, he acknowledges that he is "not as far along" as his wife. In fact, Jodi adopts the identity of "atheist" as a tactic to push her church community to expand itself theologically.
Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored some of the socio-cultural realities of the progressive Christians featured in this study. I have argued that they adopt certain *habitus*, certain ideologies and certain performative tactics that are inherent in their identities as communities that are primarily white, middle class and mainline liberal Protestant. In making this argument, I have attempted to demonstrate the effect that these social markers have on the communities featured in this study by providing descriptions of the daily ebb and flow and lived experiences of each of the churches. I have also attempted to provide an account of my own interactions with these communities in hopes of revealing, at least in part, the lens through which I approached these churches.

As with any social group, middle class, white, mainline liberal Protestants perform their sense of who they are in a variety of ways through their values and through their dispositions. In this chapter I have offered examples of both. The assumption on the part of the congregants at Holy Cross that everyone will comfortable in the local country club is one side of the coin, on the other side, Linda worries that she does not have enough 'knowledge' to join in with the men in the book study. A tension emerges out of the twining of the quintessentially middle class values of 'intellectual integrity' and 'loving relationships'. It is a tension that reveals itself in St. Matthias' struggle with Brian, the hurt feelings prevalent at West Hill after several members left the community over theological disagreements, and is most fully realized in Paul's decision to remain a 'closet' progressive Christian because he respects his wife.

As I have already noted, my first contact with most of these communities was through their book study and discussion groups. In my next chapter, I explore theories of collective
reading and collective interpretation practices. By discussing examples from my fieldwork, I examine how and why progressive Christians lend authority and precedence to popular works of biblical criticism, rather than to the bible or theological tenets. I argue that the authors themselves and historical biblical criticism become important objects around which progressive Christians construct their communities. I further point out that progressive Christians possess a textual ideology that perceives the bible as inherently authentic but ultimately inaccessible. In doing so, they present the bible as an artefact that needs to be mined for data with the tools of biblical criticism. Ultimately progressive Christians conclude that, in most cases, the bible should be displaced from its central location in the Christian tradition in order to allow other more relevant narratives and texts to speak, although it is not always clear what—if anything at all—they propose might stand in place of the bible as a central component of Christianity.
[Figure 2 - Mary-Ellen's bookcase]

[Figure 3 - Jodi's bookcase]
[Figure 4 - Sandra's books]

[Figure 5 - Suzan's bookcase]
Chapter 3 - To Mine the Text: Examining Textual Ideologies and Progressive Christian Reading Praxis

She's been waiting in line patiently to ask her question. The musty church full of two hundred middle-aged and elderly men and women heats up as audience members shift uncomfortably in their old wooden pews and crane their necks. "Bishop Spong," she begins, pulling back the microphone so that her voice won't boom quite as loudly, "how come we've never heard any of this before?" Mumbling agreement is heard throughout the room. We had just sat through a two-hour lecture, during which time the well-known former Episcopal bishop of Newark, New Jersey outlined the premise of his latest publication, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, in which he argues among other things that the Christian narrative as it has been traditionally portrayed is wrong—there was no star over Bethlehem, Jesus' parents are fictional composites, and the miracles, which for traditional believers attest to Jesus' divine status, never occurred.

Bishop John Shelby Spong, a charismatic man in his late seventies, smiles kindly at the woman, and says: "Nothing I've told you today, nothing in my weekly column, nothing on my website, nothing in my books is new information. It's been taught in every mainline seminary in North America for the past fifty years. Don't ask me why you haven't heard any of this before!—ask your ministers, your priests and your pastors. Ask those individuals who have been trained in biblical interpretation, who have read the scholarly texts and who have chosen to ignore them."

Later, over lunch I approach the woman who had asked the question. Judith—a mother of one, mature student and part-time reporter—and her husband, Stan, introduce
themselves to me. They are enthusiastic about Spong's visit to George Street United Church. The couple attends a Presbyterian Church about an hour and half away, and while this is the first time they have heard Spong speak they have read his work avidly for the past few years. Judith has recently gone back to school and is currently studying part-time for a degree in divinity.

"We’re excited to meet you," she reports. "We saw your name in the bulletin and knew that we had to talk to you," she continues referring to the announcement in the day's bulletin, which provides information about my dissertation research and contact information for those who would be willing to be interviewed as part of this project. We chat briefly about my research and my life as a graduate student at the University of Toronto. The conversation turns to the day's lecture and question and answer period.

"Bishop Spong is just so genuine!" Judith gushes. "You can really tell that he cares about all this stuff. It's made it easier for us to be Christians, you know, to actually be Christians."

"The church has got to change," her husband pipes in. "It's just got to—we've got all this new learning: science, technology, the universe. It's got to change."

Judith is nodding her head, "that's exactly what the bishop says . . . People like us, we went to church because we always did. Our friends were there, our families expected it, we wanted to raise our kids right. But you know, after reading Jack Spong everything is different—"

"—we don't have to cross our fingers during the creeds anymore!" Stan interrupts. "All that stuff about a virgin birth and the resurrection, who needs that? The church is going to change—Spong is a breath of fresh air."
While it is doubtful that Stan and Judith physically crossed their fingers during the creed, the reference is one that was evoked on more than one occasion throughout my fieldwork in reference to the presumed disconnect between personal (inner) beliefs and collective declarative statements of belief, recited in the forms of creeds and hymns during mainline liberal church services. In folk wisdom, secretly crossing one's fingers when one is telling a lie is thought to absolve the individual from any responsibility for that lie. This practice is more often than not undertaken by school-aged children (see Leonard 1989). While often recounted as a joke, this notion of crossing-fingers during specific parts of a church service points to a larger trend within progressive Christianity that is concerned with what I call an ethics of belief. This ethics of belief relies upon a specific form of intellectual integrity that assumes a referential language ideology based upon the assumption that language, or words reflect specific meanings that can be clearly understood by all who encounter them (Stromberg 1993: 6-9).  

For many progressive Christians, their initial foray into the movement has been through an engagement with progressive Christian thinkers and texts. Judith's case is exemplary: while she stopped attending church after her divorce in her early thirties, she now attends a Presbyterian Church with her son and second husband. When I asked her about her return to church during a conversation at a local coffee shop, she explained to me that it came about after she listened to a local radio broadcast featuring Spong:

One of the things that I did when I wasn't attending church regularly was I decided that I would listen to—I happened to be doing a lot of driving at that time on the weekends so I made it a point to travel at 2pm on Sundays so I

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141 Webb Keane links Protestant referential language ideologies to Calvinist concerns that a clear distinction exist between ideas and matter. It is language, rather than objects, that Calvin advocates as a means of conveying and mediating the divine. According to Keane, along with certain movements promoting scientific objectivity, the "theological purification of language" added a moral dimension to projects that sought to "reinforce the separation of material objects from the world of meanings and of agents" (2007: 66-67).
would listen to 'Tapestry' on 'CBC Radio' and John Spong was a guest one week. I only caught the last half of the interview—I wouldn't be able to tell you now, exactly what it was that intrigued me or fascinated me or resonated with me but I paid very close attention to who the guest was at the end and what the book was so that I could go and find it. I think it was *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. I think that was the book. I read that and that set me out in a whole different direction of reading and sent me exploring all kind of different ideas. So when I came back to the church it was with a different sense of the possibilities of what church could be.

For Judith, this "different sense of possibilities" involves a shift in theological focus, one that is oriented towards the future, and towards "what the church could be." Like many progressive Christians she represents this future-oriented search as one that is exploratory in nature. What is being explored is the Christian tradition with an emphasis upon the biblical narrative.

Likewise, Elizabeth, the former Anglican priest who now attends George Street United Church, explained to me that the mainline churches, even those with progressive theologies, have difficulty attracting young people to their services. Elizabeth roots this problem in the fact that the contemporary church has not adequately communicated "the good stuff" to young people and has instead focussed on parts of the Christian narrative that are historically inaccurate:

I am sure that if we could get to a whole bunch of your peers who didn't have that 'church image' from wherever it's from and could talk about a passion for justice and relationship and the world and blah, you know, the progressive stuff, people would go "Oh! Is that what the church is? You know maybe I should give it a look?" But then they would come in a see the stupid stuff going on in the church and go "What? How do they do that shit?" You know? And as long as the church's worship is 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' and it really has a star over it, there's no wonder they're not there. I don't blame them at all! Blame us! We didn't figure out how to tell people the good stuff!

In Elizabeth's view, there is something positive in the Christian narrative but it is inaccessible because of the church's focus on traditional theological tenets, extolled in songs
and teachings (as is indicated in her example of the birth narrative, which locates the nativity in Bethlehem and proposes that a divine force was capable of leading the shepherds and wise men to the stable in which Jesus was born). For Elizabeth the scientific and historical implausibility of this event stands in the way of young people coming to church—people who she believes would certainly support the progressive and humanitarian actions and practices of their church. In each of the above examples, Elizabeth's desire is to see the church alter its stance—its theology, its doctrine and its praxis—in such a way that it aligns with a modern, secular worldview.

Elizabeth's concern over how the Christian message is portrayed is shared by many within progressive Christian communities. For example, Deborah, a former Roman Catholic who identifies herself as a 'roaming Catholic', explained to me that the bible is a mythological document that should no longer hold a privileged position. I asked in an interview about how she understands the bible and its role within the church.

Rebekka: Do you think there is anything special about the Christian story? The Gospels and the Hebrew bible?

Deborah: Certainly the influence they have had has been very wide. I think because within it there are very good stories, very good messages that ring true with this intrinsic feeling that we have. And [it] gives an answer that until now we could accept. There's still a lot in there that we can accept forever, I imagine, but unfortunately it's mixed up with a lot of stuff that if we used it, we're going to be at war forever.

Rebekka: So would you like to see maybe an editing of the Christian narrative? So that it excluded some of the less helpful parts—you know, I'm thinking of the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah, or when Jesus curses the fig tree, all these sorts of things? Would you like to see that happen?

Deborah: I think that the only reason we should look at the Old Testament at all—I tried reading it through, it's too gory, I've read parts of it—is the history stuff. This is where the Christian faith came from; this is the roots of the Christian story. And then now we have to do it quickly and say these are the myths, the stories, the teachings that our belief system—and not just beliefs,
our political system, our rules and regulations—come from. But I think we have to create a new summary of our values in other stories. Because I don't think it helps to teach our kids in Sunday school those old stories and try to mine it enough to get out what you want. Like some of them, you could make them into stories for today that they would understand better . . . If you take, the David and Goliath kind of story, you know, that's not going to work itself out. Maybe we as adults can look at it and get something out of it, but I don't think teaching that in Sunday school is helpful. So I think we need stories about bullying in different ways. Something that they can see and say, "Yeah, that makes sense. That makes sense for me today at school or at home." But I don't think there's that many of them. I think you have to twist and turn. As I say it's like mining them. You're there for that little bit of truth but you've got this mess around you that causes a lot of problems by saying it's all true so you have to mine for a bit of truth. And you know you could do it much easier. Find a better mine, for better production and put that into service.

Although she is not interested in eliminating the bible completely from church services, Deborah wondered if there is not a "better way" of providing moral teachings and suggested that "other books of wisdom" might prove to be more useful in the twenty-first century. It is Deborah's approach to the bible that I find most interesting for my discussion of progressive Christianity. Like Elizabeth and many other progressive Christians, Deborah believes that there is something good at the core of the biblical narrative (that "little bit of truth" as she calls it). But she indicates that the process of accessing this truth is an arduous one. Her image of 'mining' the texts is indicative, I believe, of larger trends within progressive Christianity that have to do with its relationship to the bible.142 My contention in this chapter is that progressive Christians are defining their beliefs and worldview through a collaborative process of reading, contemplating and discussing popular texts that engage biblical exegesis.143 This process of reading, contemplating and discussing is one of their most

142 It is not surprising that liberal Christians are more likely to diminish the importance of the bible; according to survey research, liberal Christians generally read the bible less frequently than conservatives or evangelicals. They also usually tend to possess less knowledge about the biblical text (see Olson 1994: 125).

143 Indeed this is often the recommended first step for communities that wish to move in a 'progressive direction'. Two of the churches that I studied actively pursued biblical criticism as the means through which they made their presence known in the community. For example, as mentioned in Chapter One, Holy Cross
important religious activities, and it is through this process that they articulate a theology based on resistance toward more traditional and conservative representations of Christians.

In this chapter, I argue that progressive Christians have a textual ideology that perceives the bible as inherently authentic but ultimately inaccessible. I argue that the biblical text is both hyper-present and hauntingly absent from progressive communities. This notion of the bible as present through its absence is explored by Matthew Engelke in his study of Zimbabwean Christians (2004) who argues that the bible contributes to a process of "symbolic obviation" by which "the relationship of textual presence and absence unfolds in what [they] call their 'live and direct' connection with God" (2004: 11). Only once during my entire fieldwork process did the bible actually make an appearance during one of the discussion or study groups. That instance was with the community at St. Peter's in which we were asked to read our favourite bible passages. As noted above, it was an emotionally charged event in which upon hearing one of the ministers read from Psalm 23, Linda struggled to hold back tears.

I suggest that this textual ideology draws upon traditionally Protestant interactions with text and ways of being textual while simultaneously drawing upon scholarly sources of biblical criticism. This process results in an approach to scripture that both overly privileges and simultaneously rejects the biblical narrative. In many ways progressive Christians grant the bible the position of what Baudrillard (1994) calls a *simulacrum*, in that it is a faithful reproduction intentionally distorted, or changed by adherents and leaders of the progressive Lutheran Church offered its speaker series, pub nights and Sunday morning adult study as 'gifts to the community' in Newmarket, Ontario. When I spoke with them about this, they would often reference the fact that the speaker events did not occur at the church but rather at the country club and later at the local high school in an attempt to make the event more accessible to those who might be uncomfortable attending a church building. Likewise, the pub nights were intended to attract a similar audience. Likewise, at St. Matthias Anglican Church the community advertised its book study on Karen Armstrong’s *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life* (2010) in the local paper and understood it as a witness to the community.
Christian movement, as a means of providing an 'authentic' representation of their community.\textsuperscript{144} That is for progressive Christians, they believe that the version of the bible revealed through historical biblical criticism is more authentic than the text of the bible which they argue has been corrupted by authors from the second or third century and through the middle ages. In order to explore this development I rely upon contributions from 'the ethnography of reading' (Boyarin 1993), a methodology which "seeks to understand the cultural logics that organize reading" (Bielo 2009a: 12). My discussion of progressive Christian reading practices is illuminated by contributions from Bruno Latour (1993), whose study of the modern dialectical impulses to both purify and hybridize offers a convincing theoretical structure through which to analyse progressive Christian reading praxis.

It is helpful to begin with a discussion of the methodology that I employed in studying progressive Christian reading practices and to outline what I mean when I refer to a 'textual ideology'. The most fruitful genre of scholarship on this topic emerges out a self-conscious scholarly movement, the ethnography of reading, which explores those cultural logics that direct not just reading practices but also the assumptions and strategies that one brings to any reading endeavour—including questions of who is permitted to read and/or interpret a text, where and when a text can and/or should be read and how one should classify and/or engage with a text's subject matter (Boyarin 1993; see also Bielo 2009a: 12-14). In the following section of this chapter I will position my own research within the ethnography of reading, focusing specifically upon Christian collective reading settings and the practices and theologies that emerge out of collective theological reading.

\textsuperscript{144} I wish to thank Paul Bramadat, Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, for pointing this concept out to me.
Ethnography of Reading: The Study of Those Who Study Texts

It is especially interesting that the process of reading and discussing by progressive Christians is one that is undertaken in, or attached to, an institutional ecclesiastical setting. To clarify, this process is not one of closet-theologians undertaking the study of religion, but rather is an instance of the appropriation of academic works in a popularised format by religious adherents seeking to determine what they believe (or as we have seen more clearly what they do not believe framed by what they do) and subsequently fashion their religious practices around it. Studying these works provides progressive Christians with a means of publicly differentiating themselves from conservative Christians. Throughout this chapter, I argue that it is through the process of studying, reading and discussing that they practice their religion and define their Christian theology as socially embedded praxis. Although this practice of reading and discussing is only one of many religious practices, it is the one that makes them distinctive and is often presented as the first step towards 'becoming' a progressive Christian.

Reading entails much more than a cognitive process. As a social and a linguistic practice it is used to construct and maintain relationships and to communicate intentions and meanings not only between the author and the reader but also between those involved in the larger reading community (Bloome and Green 2002: 395). Socio-linguistic studies of reading practices that view reading as an event show that reading encompasses much more than simply reading in order to gather information. Reading and reading events also function as spaces for social interactions, for status assertion or as a means of control (Bloome and Theodorou 1985: 24; see also Castahiera et al. 2001). Readers are also preconditioned and shaped by the texts before, during and after reading (Darnton 2002: 21). In many instances a
book serves as a meaningful object in-and-of-itself and not merely because of the textual content of the book as it is understood. As Kathryn Lofton (2011) observes in her study of Oprah as a religious phenomenon, books in and of themselves hold significance within the reading culture of Oprah's book club. In many ways the emphasis on textuality can be seen as extending Protestant concerns in regards to reading scripture. Commenting on contemporary reading practices, Lofton explains, "there is no solo signature scripture in the empire of O. Rather the idea of a book is scriptural" (Lofton 2011: 155). In her study of Oprah, Lofton points to the fact that the books served as significant objects within the book club—used to decorate homes or individuals, as gifts or prizes, and even as physical objects on which oaths are sworn (Lofton 2011: 156; see also Darnton 2002: 22).

For religious communities, especially those within the Euro-American West that have oriented themselves as text-based traditions, the social elements of reading events and the ways which reading a text contributes to the worldview and ideology held by those within a religious community is as important as the content of the text (Bielo 2008, 2009a; Boyarin 1993; Cannell 2005b; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Kort 1996; Nord 2004). The practice of collaborative reading—along with the even more important the ensuing discussion—within a religious community is especially important for the construction and maintenance of theological beliefs, both for those who are members of the reading group as well as those who are members of the larger community that hosts the group.

I should note that the communities I studied did not make any overt references to Oprah. At St. Matthias Anglican Church we read one of Oprah's book club books, Eckhart Tolle's A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose. Some members of the group listened to Oprah's ten-week long webcast which featured interviews with Tolle and discussions of the book. However, the webcasts and their content were not central to any of the discussions. I suspect that this is because the community was quite consciously reading Tolle's work through the lens of their own progressive Christian theology and worldview. Many of the conversations focused on how Tolle's arguments could be extended to and adopted by progressive Christians, or even made applicable to Christianity in general.
Most of the members of the reading groups with which I have worked frequently noted that, along with the intellectual stimulation, their motivations for participating in a book study or discussion group contained a therapeutic element. Members speak of the group as providing a "sense of peace and assuredness," or as a means of "making connections with the community." But others state that they attend the group because it provides them with a place to express doubts: "It was very refreshing to hear him [the author of a particular text] voicing a lot of the concerns that I was having in my heart." Additionally, members attend the group to contend with new ideas in a place where it is encouraged: "Something special going on here, some honesty that a lot of other Christian churches in this town won't allow their congregants even to think about." For some the group provides an outlet in which they could participate in conversations with others who are "thinking in Spong-type directions, in Borg-type directions, in Tom Harpur-type directions."

What one might deduce from these statements is that at least some progressive Christians feel "isolated" and see these groups as a means of providing a "lifeline" to intellectual conversation (cf. Long 1993: 198). This assumption relates to Spong's identification of his followers as "believers in exile." The metaphor, like many employed by progressive Christians, is a biblical one that is used to suggest that they have been forcibly expelled from Christianity by a more traditional or fundamentalist faction of contemporary Christianity. As such, progressive Christians establish a discourse and way of being Christian that deviates from conservative Christianity.

Following Jody Shapiro Davie (1995; see also Wuthnow 1994a, 1994b), I identify the small group rather than church services themselves as the primary location for the

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146 In biblical tradition, authority, normativity, and new covenants are developed in exile and then are brought back to the centre, thereby creating a new orthodoxy and constitution.
articulation of a progressive Christian theology, one in which an individual adherent more prominently enacts religious agency. Contrasting the two, Davie explains that attendance at a church service stands as a "public performance," which while certainly instilled with meaning is also representative of a "corporate" mode of religiosity. The small group serves a space in which the adherent actively chooses to participate in a collaborative, non-scripted discussion. Davie identifies this as a space which enables an "active personal negotiation of meaning" at both a personal and collective level (1995: 1-2). Indeed, it can be argued that it is through this active and participatory negotiation of meaning that progressive Christianity emerges precisely because it promotes—and in a sense embodies and ritualizes—consideration, dialogue and doubt as opposed to acceptance of prefabricated doctrines and beliefs.147

This notion that the group attends to the personal and the collective is an important one. As Daniel A. V. Olson (1994) explained in his study of a liberal Protestant bible study at a United Methodist Church, the small reading group positioned itself between its existence as a "class" for reading and learning and its role as a "fellowship group" in which the individuals socialize and discuss personal concerns (Olson 1994: 131). The small group movement is rooted in John Wesley's eighteenth-century Methodism in which small groups gathered together with the aim of acquiring Christian Perfection. Nathan O. Hatch (1989) has shown that Methodist class meetings along with Baptist prayer meetings contributed to a democratizing trend in American Christianity. According to Robert Wuthnow (1994b), the small group has become vital within contemporary Christianity because it provides

147 This observation about the social nature of church studies is strikingly similar to those made by Eva Keller in her ethnography of the bible reading practices of Seventh-Day Adventists in Madagascar for whom bible study is a Socratic venture. Keller explains that for the Christians she studies bible study is an activity of "reflection and dialogue" rather than a process of consuming "ready-made doctrine" (Keller 2005: 114).
individuals with opportunities "to discover what biblical teachings mean." He goes on to explain that "ours is a culture in which meanings are both fundamentally important and perplexingly problematic" (352; cf. Wuthnow 1994a; see also Bielo 2009a: 6-7; Engelke 2009). Indeed, the small study group featuring popular texts and videos adds a social and semi-public dimension in that individuals are expected to participate in the discussions and to share and defend their opinions on a variety of topics. Many progressive Christians—especially those attending semi-liberal churches with fairly static liturgical practices—feel that the reading group is the only venue where they can express their beliefs freely.

Drawing upon Davie's suggestion that study groups are a unique practice in that they encourage both individual and community spiritual formation, Bielo (2009a) points out that unlike other congregational activities, the small group bible study serves as a location for "knowledge production and disposition formation" (2009a: 11). According to Bielo's assessment, the collective setting of the bible study is especially powerful because it creates a space where "individuals are able to critically and reflectively articulate the categories of meaning and action that are central to their spiritual and social life" (2009a: 12). This space for articulation in part stems from the fact that a process of negotiation is underway not just between the individual and her faith, or the community and its collective understanding of Christianity, but also between the specific members of a group who bring their personalities, worldviews and experiences into the frame of reference of what text the group is examining. Stated more definitively, Bielo argues that the act of reading is an incredibly strong and culturally constructed "forum for (and form of) social interaction, moral discourse, and epistemological formation" (2009a: 13).
In certain ways the book study and discussion groups serve as a counterpart to ritual engagement. They involve the community gathering around a text, as opposed to the text (as is common in most Christian reading practices). Instead of the performance of a monologue directed towards a divine entity, progressive Christian reading groups constitute a dialogue that serves to strengthen the collective understanding of who the community is and what its values are. My interest is not only the manner through which knowledge is negotiated and constructed within the small group setting but how that knowledge is then transferred to the larger community—both within a specific church and also within the conscious construction of Canadian progressive Christianity. The reading groups frequently discussed which texts were being studied at other progressive churches or at other churches within their denominational family. For example, after I had finished my formal fieldwork at Holy Cross Lutheran Church the community decided to look at Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity* because they felt the need to have a refresher on 'Progressive Christian Thinking 101'. Likewise during my interview with one of my interlocutors, Suzan, who attends West Hill United Church, she explained to me that she is often surprised when communities that do not necessarily identify themselves as progressive choose to read Vosper's *With or Without God*: "It's interesting when I hear about other book studies from other churches and they're going to study Gretta's book, that's like doing calculus before you have math. She totally deconstructs everything, if that's your first exposure to it? Holy Moly! It is what it is. It certainly does the job that it's meant to do."

Reading is, of course, a private venture, but it is also a socially embedded practice (Boyarin 1993). Reading collectively has a long history in both religious (Bielo 2009a; Boyarin 1989; Lambek 1990; Wimbush ed. 2008) and non-religious environments (Long
2003; Radway 1997; Rubin 1985). As Frances Devlin-Glass (2001) explains in a study of Australian women's literary reading groups, the practice of collaborative reading functions in such a way as to enable its participants to "exercise discrimination in a semiprivate world neither securely within nor outside cultural authorities," a practice which resists accommodation to, and management by, the so-called cultural mainstream. In other words, collaborative reading allows the members of a book study to "construct provisional collaborative identities using books" (Devlin-Glass 2001: 571). Likewise, Elizabeth Long argues that identity construction through the practice of reading and discussing is one that is often overlooked by scholars in favour of a "cognitive, ideational and analytic mode" of examining texts and thereby sets the solitary reader as normative (Long 1993: 192). The cognitive mode that Long describes, however, ignores the fact that reading is a socially framed practice (see also Castanheira et al. 2001). As a socially framed practice reading is shaped by larger cultural discourses and practices that are tied to understandings of the self (see Lutz 1990). Collective reading, according to Long, creates a space for "a particular kind of critical reflection that has transformative potential either for individuals or for the group as a whole" (1993: 199). Reading groups often develop around a "subtext of shared values," which has little to do with actual textual interpretation but allows for the development of new associations and ideas through conversations between individuals and texts (1993: 194). For progressive Christians, this subtext is invested with the power to construct the shared identity of the heretic and the deviant, as well as prompting the internalisation of that identity as the basis for religious narrative. Within the world of progressive Christian reading practices, the identity constructed—by which the heretic model is woven into the personal story of each
participant—becomes more powerful than the specific knowledge gleaned from the reading event.

According to Cecilia Konchar Farr (2005), the practice of collaborative reading recently has seen a significant shift, which is exemplified by the 'Oprah book club' phenomenon. Farr maintains that the 'Oprahfication' of reading democratizes reading so that "middlebrow" and "serious" literatures are brought together and made uniquely personal to each individual participating in the book club. Themes of inner transformation that stem from the reading process forge a distinctive bond between the participants in the group. As such, it encourages the creation of a new reading class who perceive themselves as agents in a public forum (Farr 2005; cf. Radway 1997: 219). In many ways, the Oprah reading phenomenon picks up the democratising impulses of the Protestant Reformation by encouraging readers to invest their own personal narratives into their encounters with text (Lofton 2011: 154).

Likewise, these themes of personal transformation and democratization of knowledge are evident in progressive Christian reading and discussion groups. Contemporary morality, scientific empiricism and historical-critical biblical exegesis are made available and accessible to each reader and become part of the "shared knowledge" of the reading group as a whole. In a sense progressive Christians resemble the 'citizen critic' identified by Rosa A. Eberly (2000). The citizen critic produces a discourse from the position of the non-expert; that is, not as a public intellectual but as an individual who speaks from a position formed by both empirical (personal) experience and established interpretations. In doing so, the citizen critic reveals the "discursive process through which cultural works affect society" (2000: 2) and expands the means through which a text and its specific interpretations gain authoritative powers. Eberly's use of the term 'citizen critic' is, as mentioned, intended to depart from
public intellectuals, whom she argues are more concerned with assuming the role of accessible expert. The citizen critic in Eberly's work, which focuses on literary criticism, serves to expose "the very unsettled and polyphonic nature of texts as well as the widely divergent judgments of actual readings" (2000: 2). Because the citizen critic does not possess expertise in literary analysis her critiques often revolve around the interaction between topics within the texts and the critic's own social worlds and abstract conceptions of public good. Eberly points out that literary criticism undertaken by non-experts in the public sphere has been most robust at points in history when institutionally based literary experts have held little cultural authority (2000: 9). This is certainly the case with the progressive Christians featured in this study who report that the experts—seminary faculty and the majority of clergy—have concealed the truth when it comes to historical biblical criticism. Likewise the practice by popular authors and by progressive Christians of making the material personally relevant as a means of engaging with the topic is explored in this chapter.

Drawing from this observation one could suggest that the remarkable contemporary surge in public interest in the origins of the Christian faith, as manifested in an outpouring of best-selling books and major motion pictures addressing biblical themes, is likewise rooted in a diminishing emphasis on the part of religious adherents on clerical authority in North America. Indeed the approach of applying the narrative directly to the non-experts' own social worlds is one that permeates religious reading practices. In her work on evangelical readers of the *Left Behind* series, Amy Johnson Frykholm (2004) observes that the narrative in the text can be described as part of what Clifford Geertz calls the "webs of significance." She argues that the books "have become part of the world readers inhabit and the world they construct for themselves" (2004: 9). In her study Frykholm explores the psychological and
sociological implications of embodying the narrative of a text arguing that evangelical readers have expanded traditional methods of reading scripture (the application of passages to specific contemporary situations) to non-biblical texts as well (in this case, the *Left Behind* series).

Like the evangelicals studied by Frykholm, the progressive Christian reading groups featured in this study support what Pamela Klassen (2006) identifies as a form of lived religion exemplifying a "text-based cosmology" (2006: 814). The use of texts as a means of differentiating themselves from other forms of Christianity is not a new tactic for liberal Protestants, as Klassen's work reveals. In her article examining early twentieth-century liberal Protestants and their use of texts as a means of accessing therapeutic culture, Klassen illustrates that texts provided a venue in which liberal Protestants may "challenge their tradition and each other," thereby advocating a form of rationality that aligns itself with historical-critical biblical exegesis and scientific objectivity (2006: 816). As a result, they were able to establish their model of health and healing as superior to those of non-literate cultures and 'heretical' forms of Christianity, namely Christian Science and Pentecostalism. The liberal Protestant adoption of text-based popular theology (through books, newspapers, missionary accounts and other methods of written communication) is, of course, derived from the traditional Protestant bible study and serves as a means to privilege and legitimise their theology and their affiliation as mainstream Christians in contrast to rival factions. For progressive Christian book study and discussion groups, engagement with texts serves a very similar purpose that is strengthened by the fact that it is undertaken as a collaborative exercise.
In his recent ethnographic work on the collaborative reading practices of evangelical study groups, Bielo (2009a) suggests that popular theological texts take on a "textual economy," which represents "the differential social capital Christian communities invest in the category of text, individual authors, individual works and distinct genres" (2009a: 110-111). Bielo's work on evangelicals offers two very important observations that are of particular relevance to this dissertation and its discussion of progressive Christian identity construction.

First, Bielo indicates that, for evangelicals, popular theological books serve as a method of reproducing orthodox Christian doctrines and practices, as well as serving as a primary means through which evangelical Christians can "witness" their faith. Comparably, the progressive Christians whom I have interviewed have recounted, on more than one occasion, instances when they had referred to Spong or Vosper in order to justify their religious practices and beliefs. They have shared many stories about giving progressive theological texts to both their friends and family in hopes of providing them with "a place to ask questions" or to "provide a different point of view." For example, at George Street United Church, several individuals referred to themselves as 'disciples of Spong'. In explaining why this term is useful Jerry recounted his experience at a dinner party of attempting to challenge an instance of theological relativism:

You never talked about sex or God in my day at a dinner table. You still don't talk about sex at a dinner table, at least not at anything I've been to. But it's amazing that somebody brings up the word 'God', or they say "what church do you go to?", or you mention Spong. All of a sudden everybody stops and the discussion starts. And I found it fascinating that these discussions are taking place . . . at this one dinner party we were going to, I found it very interesting, we were talking back and forth and the lady beside me was a Roman Catholic, a delightful lady and the one over here (points across from himself) was an Anglican and . . . anyways there were two or three different faiths. There were certainly United Church there and we got into it in an interesting way. As in
many cases, the Roman Catholic women are the most frustrated with what's going on in their churches—it's just a terrible struggle that they're having. So anyways we got back and forth. It was not too heated, but it was interesting. And then somebody said, "well, we all worship the same God anyways so what does it really matter?" And I said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" And everybody said, "What?" I said, "I don't think we do!"

And there was just this intake of air. It was the first time anybody ever challenged that. It was just sort of the easy way to get out of these conversations. But I said, "I'm sorry, but the God that you Roman Catholics relate to is not my God. And the one of the Baptists is certainly not my God. And the God of the Pentecostals is certainly not my God! The Anglican God is sort of . . . depends which: Spong Anglicans or the other Anglicans." But I said, "This is the whole point."

It was an interesting—if you're with a group of people, throw that out and it's the first time everybody kind of stopped dead in their tracks and they didn't have an answer. They said, "oh no, no, no, no. Oh yes, yes, yes" I tried to get them to keep going. I think this is an interesting mindset that people have: that it doesn't really matter because we're all worshiping the same God and so that doesn't work, for me anyway.

For progressive Christians, differences do matter because it is through their differences that they are able to articulate a distinct identity. For Jerry, the reference to Spong not only enables him to differentiate himself from Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals and non-progressive Anglicans, but it also allows him to align himself with other progressive Christians who are likewise 'disciples', or at the very least, fans and consumers of Spong's writings.

This scenario leads to the second important characteristic of theological reading groups identified by Bielo, the construction of an imagined community. Bielo follows Candy Gunther Brown (2004) in identifying popular theological texts as a means by which an imagined textual community is formed. He explains that "reading the same books has the ability to generate, quite immediately a shared sense of belonging and Christian identity for individuals who have never met or might otherwise have no binding social ground" (Bielo
Likewise, Klassen identifies early twentieth century Protestant print culture as a venue in which an imagined community is established and employed in such a way that boundaries are clearly delineated between the Protestant subject and the heathen, the convert and the deviant (Klassen 2006: 818; cf. Anderson 1983).

For progressive Christians, this imagined community is built around a series of texts that explicitly seek to dismiss what they perceive to be a more culturally powerful faction of Christianity. The consumption of texts and videos and the process of engaging with historical-critical biblical exegesis both create a clear marker by which progressive Christians are able to demarcate themselves as having a distinct way of being Christian. Additionally, the internet provides another venue in which they can connect internationally with fellow adherents through websites dedicated to progressive Christian thinkers, publications and organizations or through a variety of online forums and networking sites.

These technological forums allow for an extension of what Brian Stock calls a "textual community." For Stock this type of community requires a text, an interpreter and a public (Stock 1990: 37; see also Howe 1993: 59). What is interesting is that the addition of the internet expands the notion of what might serve as a text. While Stock himself notes that the text does not need to be confined to written text—performance, oral repetition, and memory are sufficient—in the contemporary setting the interpreter and the public need not be so concretely identified. Progressive Christians understand themselves as interpreting a variety of texts to which they assign differing degrees of authority and to a variety of publics, both real and imagined. Thus, while I have situated my work within the 'ethnography of reading', a more suitable sub-discipline would probably be the 'ethnography of interpretation', for it is not so much the practice of reading that ultimately serves as the important or defining
characteristic of the communities that I studied—I was surprised continuously throughout my fieldwork when I would arrive at a book study to discover that I was often the only one who had actually read the assigned text—but rather it is the community's impressions and interpretation of the text and its author along with the opportunity to discuss and dialogue that stands as the most important consideration.

An 'ethnography of interpretation' conducted from within a study of progressive Christian communities must attend to both the textual interpretations proffered by the progressive Christian authors, with whom the communities are engaging, as well as those particular interpretations that arise within specific communities and specific conversations. While the possible data available for this process of interpretation are varied and intermittent, I have attempted to select for analysis interpretations that are common to all of the communities that I have studied. In the next section I will begin with interpretations by the public intellectual figures within progressive Christianity and then move on to interpretations that I observed during my two and half years of in-depth fieldwork within these communities.

**Interpreting the Interpreters**

In a traditional Protestant bible study the bible is the central component of the reading event (see Bielo 2009a; 2009c; Malley 2004; Olson 1994). This status is true of the bible's physical presence where amid a wash of neon highlighters, dog-eared pages, passages double and sometimes triple underlined or starred, the bible is read by a particular believer who figuratively traces and inscribes their own narrative and concerns onto the pages of the book. Biblical references often serve as a central focus within a traditional bible study—scripture
maintains an authoritative status which structures the very vocabularies and analogies available for use by members of a specific study group (Bielo 2009a: 17; Olson 1994: 146). Engelke points out that while the bible is understood as something concrete it possesses a certain degree of agency which can change according to circumstances. Following from this logic, Christians often speak of the bible as the "living Word," a term which is itself derived from biblical language and assigns agency to the text\(^\text{148}\) (Engelke 2009: 155) or understands the text as somehow capable of 'speaking' (D. Boyarin 1993).

This notion of text being capable of speaking to the individual adherent is especially popular amongst contemporary evangelicals for whom the bible continually occupies a central space in both their personal and social lives (Bielo 2009a; see also Hatch and Noll 1982; Malley 2004; Muse 2005). In most cases, the way that the bible is perceived to 'speak' is determined by the worldview of the interpreter. Craig Martin (2009) explains that "interpretive variances can be best accounted for by the hypothesis that these popular 'interpreters' of the Bible and of Jesus' message take their own values and unselfconsciously project them into the text" (2009: 6.3). Martin's discussion aims to explore instances of interpretive negotiation and manipulation on the part of those within interpretive communities, in addition to attesting to the need for caution on the part of academics in their interpretive practices. Following Arthur Droge (2008), Martin singles out biblical scholars, including Robert Funk, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, who are guilty of "trying to pry radical leftist values out of the 'historical Jesus' for the last quarter of a century." According to Martin, the projects of these biblical scholars attempt to align Jesus with the social agendas of contemporary liberal democrats in America (Martin 2009: 6.22).

\(^{148}\) "Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joint from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).
Established by the Westar Institute, the Jesus Seminar is a well-known but divisive example of an historical Jesus study. It was instigated in 1985 by Robert W. Funk, who invited thirty scholars together to attempt "to identify an agreed inventory of sayings and actions by Jesus that could serve as a database for Jesus studies" (Jenks 2000: 2). The Jesus Seminar consists of both renowned scholars and less respectable ones. As part of their methodology, Jesus Seminar scholars have elected to discuss, debate and decide upon the historical accuracy of approximately five hundred different New Testament passages. In order to do so each scholar is asked to vote by dropping coloured beads into boxes. The beads—red, pink, grey and black in colour—register the participants' views regarding the historical reliability of individual scripture passages in representing the acts or words of the historical Jesus. Red signifies an unequivocal yes vote: Jesus did this, Jesus said this. Pink indicates certain reservations. Black represents a complete rejection of the passage: this was a later development probably by someone with a theological agenda. Finally, grey denotes a rejection of the passage but a feeling that it may still contain some historical utility in determining the overall character of Jesus.

According to Funk, the initial regulations and methodology they established were the key component of the Seminar's scholarly work. In contrasts to other institutions, the Seminar determined that with each topic they "would come to a decision, no matter how provisional or tentative" (Funk 2000: 11; 1996: 8). In doing so, the decisiveness with which the Seminar approaches its data divides its work from that of other academics. Upon the completion of each debate, the Jesus Seminar announces consensus and forms a conclusion.

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149 The Westar Institute is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to fostering research in religious studies and promoting biblical literacy. According to the organization's mission statement it claims no religious affiliation and does not promote a specific theological perspective, however, many of its supporters and members of the board of directors can be classified as liberal and progressive Christians.

The effect of the work of the Jesus Seminar on liberal and progressive Christians is telling. Over and over again in my research, the progressive Christians that I studied referenced the Jesus Seminar as an authority. Funk claims that the Seminar's practice of publishing their work in "non-technical language" is an important contribution to the Seminar's popularity because it allows non-specialists to access and understand the debates. In my interview with Spong he explained that his work is necessary because it makes the scholarly works of the Jesus Seminar accessible to a general reading audience.\(^{150}\)

I make no bones about the fact that I'm not a primary scholar, I just read what the primary scholars write and try to communicate it and that's a vital role. I don't denigrate that role, somebody's got to do that. I was the only member of the Jesus Seminar in America that didn't have an earned PhD. All of them speak Greek and Hebrew. I do a little bit of Greek and a little bit of Hebrew, but I sure don't come close, so I can't argue with them when they get to their technical analysis of these things. But what I can do is to take their insights and communicate them to the average person on the street That's what my books are for, I don't write for the academy, I write for the person in the pew.

According to Spong, it is essential to make this type of information available to a lay audience. In an earlier work discussing this topic he declares that, "unless theological truths can be separated from pre-scientific understandings and rethought in ways consistent with our understanding of reality, the Christian faith will be reduced to one more ancient mythology that will take its place alongside the religions of Mount Olympus" (Spong 1992: 31).

\(^{150}\) Members of the Jesus Seminar themselves have also published popular texts for a lay audience (see Funk 1996; Hoover et al. 2004).
Many of Spong's writings have provocative titles such as *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die* (1998) or *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (2005). This latter text involves an in-depth exegesis by which Spong seeks to rid the bible of its miraculous, non-historical and immoral components. The text provides contemporary and historical examples of ways in which scriptural passages have been "misused." The term "sins of scripture" refers to "those terrible texts that have been quoted throughout Christian history to justify behaviour that is today universally recognized as evil" (2005: 18). Spong also attempts to contextualize the passages in terms of their original societal meanings and logically disprove their relevance for today. In reality, Spong's text does more than merely contextualize, in that he also seeks to expose those who hold a literal view of scripture to be naive at best, and immoral and deceptive at worst. The book outlines how the text has been (incorrectly) used throughout history to justify environmental degradation, limited access to women in leadership roles within the church, restrictions of same-sex relationships and equal marriage, child abuse, anti-Semitism and general closed-mindedness in regards to scientific, scholarly and ethical innovations. Each chapter of the book examines the scriptural passages that Spong believes should be discarded.

In the Preface of *Sins of Scripture*, Spong explains that he had initially been reluctant to undertake a book looking at the negative social impact and use of scriptural passages because he felt that "he had moved beyond that debate and considered it to be essentially over" (2005: xii-xiii). He decided to write the book after viewing Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which, for Spong, pointed to the fact that anti-Semitism continued to prosper in

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151 In what follows I offer a close reading of *Sins of Scripture* (2005), which offers clear insight into progressive Christian bible ideologies. For the sake of brevity I have chosen to look specifically at this text; according to the promotional material on his website ([www.johnshelbyspong.com](http://www.johnshelbyspong.com)), Spong has published over twenty books, many of which have sold over a million copies.
the Christian imagination. Spong's assertion here that the text was inspired by his viewing of
Gibson's film supports my point that all texts—more specifically, the ones under study by
progressive Christians—are written in conversation with history and culture, and the 'social
life of scriptures' (Bielo 2009c). Spong's "separation" of theological truths from their "pre-
scientific" past, hopes to purify the biblical text of this social life, but does not succeed. In
Spong's case, the purpose for writing the book was to provide a space to outline the
interpretive strategies utilized by a version of Christianity from which he desired to distance
himself and his readers. In discussing his qualifications to undertake this project, Spong, who
is the same generation as many of his readers, points out two primary credentials: his love
affair with the biblical text since childhood and his position as a church insider who "yearns
to see the church become what it is meant to be" (2005: 5). In offering these two
justifications, Spong locates himself physically in relation to the church and to the text
itself.152

Spong holds an assumption that certain theological or ideological truths exist apart
from but are revealed in the biblical narrative. Thus there exists a correct methodology of
reading that enables the reader to extract these "truths" which are otherwise ensnared by the
"sins of scripture." In this approach to reading, historical and scientific evidence are the tools
by which the biblical text might be purified. Purification is manifested by comprehension and
results in conviction on the part of the adherent. As Eva Keller explains, the notion that
knowledge will inevitably lead to conviction is often assumed by Christian communities. In
Keller's case, the fact that she had learned so much about Seventh Day-Adventism but had
not converted to the religion was evidence for her subjects of study that she must have

152 Spong goes on to discuss his early interactions with his family bible, in which his own genealogical record—in
the form of births, marriages and deaths—was documented (Spong 2005: 5).
misunderstood some key part of what she had learned. The idea that she might not accept as true the religious knowledge that she had obtained throughout her fieldwork was never considered by her interlocutors (Keller 2005: 120). This point is even more so the case when considering progressive Christianity. The notion that one would disregard or reject historical or scientific evidence is not really considered and those individuals who do so are relegated to the status of lost causes; they are presented as fundamentalists and other Christians who are too conservative to "deal with" the effects of historical-biblical criticism or scientific knowledge.

Interestingly, while Spong ultimately rejects a literalist reading of scripture, he adopts a hermeneutical approach to the bible that is in many ways similar to ones employed by fundamentalist Christians who presume that text is the static and unchanging 'Word of God' and base their entire worldview and ensuing ideology upon this assumption.\(^{153}\) Naturally, Spong believes that his reading of biblical text and his process of elimination or inclusion is guided by contemporary scientific understandings and biblical scholarship. Furthermore, he explains that he seeks not only to expose the 'terrible texts of the bible' but more importantly to "recover the ultimate depth of the texts," which for him reveal the divine within each individual (2005: xiv). Regardless, Spong's approach to scripture, as outlined above, in many ways remains defined by the literalist readings that he seeks to dismiss, albeit Spong's literalism stems from a focus on history and science as opposed to tradition and faith.\(^{154}\)

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\(^{153}\) Elsewhere (King 2005), I have termed this phenomenon 'neo-literalism' to denote an approach to reading scripture that reads the text in a literal manner but ultimately rejects the bible's authority because of an inability on the part of the reader to reconcile their reading of the text with a modern, scientific, liberal humanist perspective. This hermeneutic should be distinguished from literalism, which for fundamentalist and conservative Christians accompanies an assumption that the literal reading of the text should direct their worldview, beliefs and lifestyle.

\(^{154}\) This observation regarding Spong's work is a prominent one that has been made by many both within conservative and liberal theological circles. For example in an article written for Christian Century, biblical
Spong's interpretive style is comparable to the ten features of a literal interpretation that Vincent Crapanzano (2000) identifies as characteristic of fundamentalists, originalists and other literalists. They are as follows:

1. It focuses on the referential or semantic dimension of language—more specifically, on the word—rather than on its rhetorical or pragmatic (that is, its context-relating) dimensions.
2. It assumes a simple, unambiguous correlation of word and thing.
3. It insists on the single, the essential, the "plain, ordinary, commonsense" meaning of the word.
4. It believes that the meaning of the text, at least a sacred or otherwise exceptional text, is ultimately decidable.
5. It finds figurative understanding to be distorting, even corrupting. Or it contains such figuration in special genres, like "poetry" or "parable," which limit its extension.
6. It stresses authorial intention—"original intention"—as an indicator of right meaning.
7. It views certain texts as fundamental—as grounding meaning.
8. Its practitioners are given to quoting or citing such texts on all manner of occasions.
9. It gives priority to the written—the texts—over the spoken and in the case of sacred texts like the Bible, at times over experience.
10. Its proponents argue for the most part that a text must be interpreted in its own terms before it can be applied to a particular situation. In other words, they tend to separate exegesis, interpretation, and application from one another rather than conjoin them in a single, mutually enriching movement. (Crapanzo 2000: 2-3).

While certainly, progressive Christians employ their interpretive style to different ends than the fundamentalists whom Crapanzano studies, they do share many similarities and approaches to scripture. Specifically, progressive Christians' continued focus on the bible is what Crapanzano calls a "secure reference point" (2000: 3); one could extend this standing to other stalwarts of progressive Christianity and suggest that historical-critical biblical exegesis, liberal humanism and scientific empiricism also stand as semi-secure points of reference.

scholar and conservative Christian, Luke Timothy Johnson argues that "Bishop Spong thinks he has escaped his fundamentalist past, but he has not. He remains defined by the literalism he so strenuously battles, and his vaunted "liberalism" is one confined by a tired rationalism" (1993: 458).
It is necessary for Spong's project that the bible retain the status of a "secure reference point" even as he seeks to diminish its authoritative power. By the very nature of participating in the interpretation of biblical texts, Spong reifies both biblical authority and the practice of interpretation. This process is completed by engaging in hermeneutical activities that seek to make the bible personally relevant to Spong and his readers, which he does by linking the moral and the historical dimensions of the biblical text (cf. Malley 2004). Indeed, it is only through historicising the text that Spong is able to reject it or offer an alternative reading that complies with his own morality. First, he points to the figure of God depicted in scripture as destructive, when he writes the following:

I do not understand how anyone can saddle God with the assumptions that are made by the biblical authors, warped as they are both by their lack of knowledge and by the tribal and sexist prejudices of that ancient time. Do we honor God when we assume that the primitive consciousness found on the pages of scripture, even when attributed to God, is somehow righteous? Do we really want to worship a God who plays favorites, who chooses one people to be God's people to the neglect of all the others? (2005: 18).

In doing so, Spong subjects the biblical narratives to contemporary morality and finds the biblical text to be lacking. From that point, he proceeds to outline the historical impossibility and inconsistencies of the scriptural narrative by drawing upon the works of biblical-historical criticism to point out that Moses was not the author of the Torah, and David did not write the psalms—an assertion which Jesus makes in Mark 12:36-37, Matthew 22:43-45 and Luke 20:42-44—which enables Spong to also question the accuracy of Jesus' teachings and miracles. Finally, Spong engages with the scientific critique of scripture in

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155 Spong offers several specific examples of how the bible's representation of God fails to correspond with our modern consciousness. The bible's version of God is one who sends the flood to kill everyone except for Noah and his family; stops the sun so as to enable Joshua to slaughter the Amorites (Joshua 10: 12-15); commands King Saul to site Amaleck and destroy everything they have including men, women, children and beasts (1 Samuel 15:3); allows his followers to sell their daughters into slavery (Exodus 21:7) and to possess slaves from other countries (Leviticus 25:44); mandates death to anyone who is caught violating the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2), cursing (Leviticus 24:13-14), blaspheming (Leviticus 24:16) (Spong 2005: 18-19).
which he points out that "the Bible makes assumptions that most of us who live in a post-
Newtonian world of 'natural law' could never make" (Spong 2005: 21). Directing his attention to Jesus, Spong explains that a literal reading of the Jesus story "will reveal either unbelievable miracles or a land of make-believe" (Spong 2005: 21).

Instead, concerning Jesus, Spong explains that the "only alternative is to be forced to face the fact that we have in the gospels only mythical accounts of Jesus' life" (2005: 21). While he seeks to deconstruct the elements of the biblical narrative that have been historically utilized to oppress others, he also contends that his reading of scripture is intended "to offer believers a new doorway into the biblical story" in which Jesus serves as what he calls a 'God presence' and a new dimension of humanity (2005: 24-25). In doing so, Spong invites his followers to a figurative mountaintop where they can observe as "the idols of creed, scripture and church" are destroyed (2005: 25) so that they may ultimately take up the task of Jesus, which according to Spong is to "oppose everything that diminishes the life of a single human being, whether it is race, ethnicity, tribe, gender, sexual orientation or religion itself" (2005: 25-26).

Spong's language, multiple examples from scripture, and appeal to post-Newtonian reason add a rhetorical element to his arguments that evidently appeals to his audiences. He conducts over two hundred speaking engagements annually to sold-out crowds and standing-room only auditoriums and church halls. When I asked him in an interview in 2009 to identify his audience, he responded that he has clearly identified his audience: "I clearly identify my audience, I don't write for the convinced, I don't write for the people who are in

156 Among these examples are the pillars of cloud and fire that supposedly led the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years (Exodus 13, 16:35); the special powers attributed to Elijah and Elisha who possessed the ability to miraculously replenish food supplies (1 Kings 12:8-15, 17: 8-16); an iron axe-head that floats (2 Kings 6:5); the raisings of the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 4:8-37) (Spong 2005: 20-21).
their churches, I'm not at war with them. If they want to stay there that's fine with me."

Instead, he explained that his audience is comprised of those individuals whom he calls 'believers in exile':

I address the people who are either dropping out of organised religion because it doesn't make any sense to them or are closing their minds and hanging on for dear life inside the institution, but they know it's a losing battle. And so I call them the 'Church Alumni Association'; I call them 'believers in exile'. They're still close enough to their life of faith that they miss it when they leave it and it's that missing that gives me the power to communicate another possibility to [them].

As such, Spong constructs an identity that his audience very clearly adopts as their own—as is evident in the example of Jerry (above), who differentiates between 'Spong Anglicans' and 'other Anglicans'. Indeed, their longing makes them willing consumers of Spong's works and eager adherents to the 'believers in exile' moniker. Not only does Spong provide this group with an identity but also a way of being Christian, as well as the linguistic tropes and ideologies that accompany it.

Historians of intellectuals have been interested in the roles that popular writers have played in the development of ideologies throughout the twentieth century (Sapiro 2004). In his important essay, "Did You Say Popular?", Pierre Bourdieu (1991) explicates that popular is often defined in terms relational to those things that are excluded from legitimate language. Bourdieu argues that popular is an elastic concept that is applicable to a variety of circumstances and identities when the need arises (Bourdieu 1991: 90-91). Elsewhere Bourdieu points out that the opportunity to speak on behalf of the 'popular' is "one of the things at stake in the struggle between intellectuals" in relation to questions regarding who might serve as an authorized spokesperson and what kinds of power this authority produces (Bourdieu 1990: 150).
With this in mind, I ask the following: What happens when scholarly ideas disseminate from the realm of specialized discourses into popular and public ones? Bourdieu suggests that specialized discourses derive their efficacy from a "hidden correspondence between the structure of social space within which they are produced"—in this instance the academy—and the "structure of the field of social classes within which the recipients are situated and relation to which they interpret the message"—here, reading groups in progressive Christian churches (1991: 41).

In progressive Christian communities, the popular author establishes him or herself as the medium through which scholarly ideas are made available to a lay audience. They present themselves as experts—or the next best thing—with training in historical-critical biblical exegesis, either as clergy persons or scholars, and thus possess the symbolic capital and social competence with which to stand as leaders and spokespersons within this movement. Bourdieu defines social competence as the ability to interact with a group whose statements are semantically empty—that is, they mean nothing outside the community in which they are spoken. Instead, the authoritative power that is imposed upon a delegated representative by the group is based not on the actual content of the discourse—or even if the discourse is understood—but rather on the merit of symbolic capital of collective identity (Bourdieu 1991). According to Bourdieu, "the efficacy of a discourse, its power to convince, depends on the authority of the person who utters it" (1977: 653). In the case of Spong, he speaks as an ordained member of the church, and therefore with the authority of a clergy person, but more importantly he locates his authority through his appeal of being the one who is brave enough to share "the truth" with laypersons (see above).
As Martin explains, a popular spokesperson will often base his authority in the text itself, rather than upon his interpretation in order to shield the audience from the fact the meaning received by the audience is derived from the interpretation rather than the text itself (Martin 2009: 6.4). In the case of Spong, his authority is derived not so much from the authority of the bible but rather from the authority of historical-critical biblical exegesis. Regardless, the authoritative structure maintains a text-based focus—the reader receives a message from a book (the popular text) that derives its authority from the popular spokesperson's interpretative skill set—which he, or she, has access to through his or her own reading of academic, scholarly works.

Herein lies the key to the reception of popularising theologies that build upon academic or historical-critical biblical exegesis. We may learn as much from what these authorised spokespersons exclude from their writing as from what they include. A critical analysis of these popular religious writings suggests that while they claim their authority from scholarly sources—as Spong does in the scene I describe in the introduction of this chapter—their attention to scholarly method and detail is limited and biased. Given what some might argue is prejudiced use of scholarship, what is it about their rhetorical styles and strategies of argumentation that make these authors resonate with their (usually) well-educated audiences?

While the popular authors rely on historical-critical biblical exegesis to make their points and gain credibility, the authority of the knowledge they present rests not on its scholarly merit but rather on its repudiation of the church's traditionally authoritative rendition. In trying to determine what the bible actually means, progressive Christians begin with the traditional Jesus narrative and demythologize it according to the version of the New
Testament constructed by the Jesus Seminar and other theological popularisers. The text is also rewritten and re-presented in order to accommodate a more progressive worldview. For example, popular writer Joanna Manning (like many others following the success of The Da Vinci Code) rewrites Jesus' narrative as one in which he and Mary Magdalene are co-teachers; as such, she is the favourite disciple, not the adulterous woman or prostitute. Manning roots her version of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mary, an extra-canonical text that was discovered at the turn of the nineteenth century (Manning 2006: 28-30). Discussing Jesus' mother, Spong reinterprets the Virgin Mary's claim to virginity as an experience of rape rather than a miraculous occurrence. Knowing that a virgin cannot give birth, but needing to attend to the biblical claim, Spong rewrites the story by declaring that Mary was the victim of rape. Spong even goes so far as to claim that now that he has brought the "true" story to light, he has liberated Mary and countless generations of Christian women from the impossible ideal of virgin motherhood.

But are Mary and other Christian women actually liberated through rape? I contend that the power of this new 'virgin birth narrative' lies not in its so-called scholarly sources, but rather derives its authority from the challenge that this idea poses to traditional and public

157 The theory regarding Mary as a victim of rape stems from, among other sources, Celsus' second-century anti-Christian polemics, which were revitalized by feminist biblical scholar Jane Schaberg (1987: 165-169). This is not the accepted scholarly account concerning the virgin birth narrative. While Spong's omission of the birth narratives as a whole is supported by academic arguments showing that the biblical text does not align with a scholarly reconstruction of the period what is more telling is the means through which the orthodox narrative is then replaced by Spong with an unorthodox version that often is supported by Gnostic, extra-canonical texts, or by a sense of therapeutic importance.

158 Elsewhere, in this same work, Spong advocates the theory recently popularised by the Da Vinci Code that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. Spong suggests that the wedding at Cana must have been Jesus' wedding to Mary Magdalene, otherwise why would he have cared about the diminishing supply of wine. Of course Spong rejects the idea that Jesus miraculously turns water into wine, because in his version Jesus rushes out to buy more wine in order to tether the tears of his mother, the embarrassed hostess of the evening.
discourses on the uniqueness of Jesus and the sexuality of his mother. Ultimately, it seems that the forms of knowledge and the relationship between the popular author and his or her audience are found in the arena of competition—the struggle for social dominance between two opposite social groups or forces occurs within the realms of perspective, knowledge and language. For progressive Christians the arena of competition is perceived to be between a dominant traditional and conservative interpretation promoted by the Christian Right and that of progressive Christians whose interpretation has been marginalized and concealed by conservative forces.

What is of particular interest to scholars of religion is the means by which these reinterpretations are acquired. In each instance, parts of the biblical narrative that do not conform to an empirical or liberal worldview are dismissed. In *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (2007), Spong writes that "destroying Jesus is not my goal; destroying the layers of ever-hardening concrete that have encased him is" (2007: 14). Furthermore he identifies the traditional birth narrative found in Matthew and Luke to be fictitious: "there were no stars, no angels, no wise men, no shepherds and no manger. This is our first conclusion. We move on from there" (2007: 24). In their desire to "move on," many progressive Christians suggest that certain narratives should be eliminated completely. Others feel that it is time to "move on" altogether from the conversations and concerns that Spong and others are raising—it is time to "move on" from the bible.

I sit down for coffee with Suzan, a middle-aged nurse with a ten year old daughter and six year old son. "Last Friday night my daughter's school choir was singing a benefit concert at an old Baptist Church," she tells me. "My son couldn't sit still at all . . . he was

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159 See Asad (2003: 183) and Casanova (1994) on the role of religion in public discourses.
playing with the hymnals, the order of service and then at one point he pulled out the bible."

Mimicking the slow cadence of her son's voice she continues, "Ho-oly Bi-ble. What's this?"

Suzan's church does not read the bible anymore. After years of deconstructing biblical texts their community has determined that it is time for other voices and others texts to occupy the place of privilege in their church's lectionary. In doing so, her community rejects the power attributed to biblical texts and instead focuses their energies on processes of deconstruction which reveal the ways in which the text has served as tool to hinder or oppress individuals and/or communities. Indeed, this worldview informs not just the way that the community reads scripture or conducts exegesis but their approach to texts more generally.

In its two more recent book studies, West Hill United Church has decided to read books that are clearly not about religion. In 2010 the book study group read John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* (2008), which argues that Canada is a Métis nation possessing a subconsciousness that is informed by the promotion of welfare and the common good, values derived from our initial interactions with the First Nations inhabitants of Canada. Saul's process of determining this 'true' version of Canadian history is not unlike that undertaken by progressive Christians in their quest for the historically accurate, authentic version of the biblical text. When I pointed out this observation to various members of the book study a few nodded in agreement indicating that history has always been written by the winners and their

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160 Suzan is an active lay-leader at West Hill United Church. She grew up in the United Church of Canada and has been involved in it through various forums since she was a child. The readings at West Hill United Church have included selections from *The Road Less Travelled*; 'Vision Works' (a document created by West Hill United Church in an attempt to articulate the common values held by members of the community); writings by Richard Dawkins, poetry, films, etc.

161 For example, in the closest thing that West Hill United Church has to a creedal statement, a document called 'Vision Works', which was first compiled in 2004 and then was re-written in 2009, the church explains that it holds a diverse approach to textual sources. This document is available on the church's website: [http://westhillunited.squarespace.com/visionworks-2009/](http://westhillunited.squarespace.com/visionworks-2009/) (Accessed March 9, 2011). (See also Appendix D).
task is incumbent upon them to provide voices to those who had been silenced by previous
generations. Saul's book was especially meaningful because it provided a venue in which to
reconstruct their understanding of Canadian citizenship as directed towards social justice—a
core value held by the community—and to preferential treatment of those who have
previously not been able to access power.\footnote{The relationship between the United Church of Canada and Canada's first peoples has been particularly precarious. In 1986 the United Church of Canada apologised to Canada's first peoples for their participation in Canada's National Assimilation Policy, which included residential schooling. This apology was acknowledged but not accepted in 1988 by the All Native Circle Conference. A second apology was issued in 1998 by Moderator Bill Phipps on behalf of the United Church of Canada and subsequently was deemed acceptable by First Nations communities, as well as the larger Canadian general public (see Greenberg 2012; Tavuchis 1991).}
Saul argues that the replacement of "Peace, Welfare and Good Government" with "Peace, Order and Good Government" in the 1867 British North America Act is the source of the unravelling of Canadian national identity.

Through their use of popular texts—religious and historical—and by privileging the
process of interpretation progressive Christians salvage what we might call "a use-able
past."\footnote{In a similar fashion Erin A. Smith (unpublished) argues in her study of a Unitarian Universalist reading group that their discussion and interpretations of Elaine Pagels' \textit{Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas} (2003) and Dan Brown's \textit{The Da Vinci Code} (2003) provided a means for them to construct what Smith terms "a usable religious past," through which they can differentiate themselves both spiritually and politically from evangelicals.} In the next section, following Bruno Latour (1993), I will discuss the modern impulses that contribute to this re-presentation of the past and the way that the past, in this
case, functions as an artefact. Specifically Latour examines how a desire to purify is part of
the so-called modern psyche and examines the unacknowledged side-effects that the drive for
purification spurs through the manufacturing of hybrids.\footnote{By hybrids, Latour refers to the combining of nature and culture, which through the process of translation create "entirely new types of being" (Latour 1993: 10).}
Rewritten Bible: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed . . .

Within the North American context, controversies over the legitimacy of different interpretations are related to controversies surrounding translation and how certain translation might alter theological tenets. Peter J. Thuesen (1999) explains that English Protestant translations of the bible represented themselves as scholarly works but were shaped by anti-Catholicism, ethnocentrism, Social Darwinism and scholastic evolutionism (Thuesen 1999: 28-39). By the end of the twentieth century, the search for a more 'accurate' or 'scholarly' translation, originally presented optimistically as a tool for ecumenism, had led to an ever widening gap between liberals and conservatives. The initial projects of biblical translation in the mid-twentieth century posited the ideal of a scientific and impartial translation (Thuesen 1999: 146), and it is this notion of an impartial and authentic translation that many progressive Christians hold when they discuss the possibility of an 'authentic' or 'original' text.

While the texts that progressive Christians discuss are often religious or spiritual in nature and often include popular biblical exegesis, the bible is noticeably absent but also remarkably present as the means through which progressive Christians situate their theology. As mentioned above, the bible in many ways is presented as an artefact from which the collective adherents and individual reader are attempting to extract a kernel of truth. This notion of text-as-artefact presents the sense that while the truth might be buried deep within the biblical narrative, it is also lurking somewhere behind the text itself. I argue that the translation makes for progressive Christian popular theology is the decision on the part of the Revised Standard Version (full version published in 1952) to retranslate Isaiah 7:14.

In line with Spong’s retelling of the virgin birth, one of the most oft-referenced examples of the difference translation makes for progressive Christian popular theology is the decision on the part of the Revised Standard Version (full version published in 1952) to retranslate Isaiah 7:14. Whereas the King James Bible reads "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel,” the Revised Standard Version states "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel."

For a sample of typical texts, see Appendix B for a list of the book studies in which I participated.
language that progressive Christians use invokes an imagery of excavation or extraction that is not unique to contemporary progressive Christianity. Nineteenth-century biblical criticism exemplified in Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1961 [1906]) and certain contemporary strands (e.g. Dawes 2000; Martin 2000) pick up this notion that finding the 'truth' behind the biblical representation involves an arduous, even impossible, journey.

While the biblical text is often dismissed in this process, its frameworks are retained. Deborah's suggestion that a 'better mine' be located is evident in the following example in which the book study group at West Hill United Church endeavoured to rewrite the Ten Commandments. In doing so, they retain the idea that some sort of directional statement (commandments) concerning appropriate human activity is needed while simultaneously dismissing any biblical authority for generating commandments.

Joel, our facilitator for the evening book study, separated us into four groups of five or six members and directed us to different parts of the church hall, lobby area and sanctuary, where we were to meet for discussion. I held three fingers together, like a child does, so I would not forget to which group I had been assigned and cringed because our group was asked to meet at the front of the church's sanctuary, which is always dark and cold on Friday nights. It does however afford a different view of the church in which I'd spent the last three months worth of Sunday mornings and every other Friday night for over the past year.

Joel handed out two sheets of paper. The first listed a series of 'greatest commandments' from different religious traditions: slight variations of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' with accompanying religious symbols so that one would know to which tradition they belonged. The second sheet listed the Ten Commandments in two

"The problem with the Ten Commandments," Joel explained, "is that they reflect the cultural context of the bible, not our current world."

Heads around the room nodded in agreement. "It doesn't make sense for us to follow all those rules. The rules about food, forbidding homosexuality, treatment of women, treatment of people with diseases, we know those teachings are wrong. What I want you to do today is break into your small groups and think about what commandments you think are important. We're going to rewrite the Ten Commandments for us to use today, here, at West Hill United Church." With that Joel began to distribute large pieces of construction paper shaped to look like the stone tablets which Charlton Heston carried down the mountain as Moses in the 1956 film, The Ten Commandments.

As we began to gather our things and move into our assigned locations, Joel called over his shoulder. "You only need to do six. The first four of the original Ten Commandments are religious. So we can automatically exclude them. Just do six. We'll break for our snack time in thirty minutes."

As is often the case and much to the dismay of my own studious habits, my group spent the first part of our time together not doing the assignment. Instead they told stories about Sunday school teachers and pastors who had made them memorize the Ten Commandments and what a waste of time these experiences had been. They talked about how they didn't like the tone of the Ten Commandments. As one woman explained, "The Ten Commandments are too negative, they all start 'thou shalt not . . .' they should be about what you should do, not what you shouldn't do."
From there we moved on to a discussion about why the Ten Commandments had even been written. One member of our group, Stan, was sure it was about power and attempts to control the masses, while another took woman, Kassy, took a functionalist approach, pointing out that the food restrictions, especially, served as a rudimentary medical science. Soon enough Joel came by and pointed out that we only had ten minutes left. It was time to get down to business. We talked about what values the church held. We identified justice, love and caring for others and the environment to be at the core of the church's worldview. We decided that because we didn't like the negative tone of the Ten Commandments we would issue a series of affirmative commandments. With my eye on the clock, I tentatively suggested 'Share' as a straightforward and simple commandment rooted in the Christian tradition and inclusive enough to reflect a progressive Christian worldview. My group loved it and before time was up we came up with a total of four commandments. It was not quite the requested six but we were confident that they epitomized the values of the larger community at the church. Hastily Stan wrote them down on our construction paper stone tablet.

1 – Share
2 – Have Compassion
3 – Take Responsibility for Own Actions
4 – Leave No Footprint

After the snack and social time we returned to the church's main hall to present our Commandments to the entire group. Stan volunteered to go first and began to read off our set of commandments.

"Number One, Share."

"Share what? Share poison?", quipped Kevin, a vocal member of the book study group.
Everyone laughed.

"No, I'm serious," Kevin insisted, leaning forward in his chair. "This is what got us into trouble in the first place. You can't just say 'share' people might misinterpret it. There's a lot of things I'd rather you not share with me."  

Kevin's assertion that the community should be wary of any statements that might be misinterpreted is a fair one. He worries that 'share' could be taken out of a context and purposely manipulated to the evil end of poisoning someone else. One of the criticisms which progressive Christians face and admit to is the fact that they feel that the bible has been used to that type of end in the past. As noted above, for progressive Christians the bible serves as both a raw resource which they anticipate the possibility of refining in order to access authentic religiosity or spirituality and also as an obstacle that obstructs their access to this more authentic version.

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167 There were three other groups. Below are their "six commandments":

**Group 2**
1. Preserve the Faith
2. Treat Others as you would like to be treated
3. Know Yourself
4. Respect all Living Creatures

**Group 3**
1. Encourage respect, integrity and wonder in all
2. See the spirit within others and all creation
3. Never stop learning
4. Live with Honour, integrity and joy
5. Live life on the planet leaving it in a better way than you found it
6. Make love your legacy

**Group 4**
1. Love one another, the planet, creatures and all resources
2. Follow your gut feeling
3. Be open-minded and honour the opinions of others
4. Support others' weaknesses and strengths
5. Be conscious in every moment, consider the effects of your actions on others
6. Trust actions over words
This discussion of progressive Christian reading practices is illuminated by contributions from Bruno Latour (1993), whose study of the modern dialectical impulses to both purify and simultaneously hybridize offers a convincing theoretical structure through which to analyse progressive Christian reading praxis. In discussing progressive Christianity, I find Latour’s understanding of purification/hybridization, the modern constitution and rupture with the past to be most helpful in illuminating what cultural tropes progressive Christians employ in their encounters with text.

Latour argues that the modern impulse\textsuperscript{168} is one that is driven by a desire for purity, an impulse which he claims was born in the discovery of the modern, scientific method that introduces the laboratory and scientific instruments as agents capable of testifying to actual events (e.g. experiments) and yielding results while remaining free from human desires and imperfections. Because the laboratory serves as a space that is posited as objective and capable of testifying the truth, it introduces a worldview in which truth and reality are thought to be intellectually tangible and therefore available for study. The question remains, however, intellectually tangible to whom and available for study by whom? In his infamous essay, "Science as Vocation," Max Weber (1959 [1919]) suggests that modernity is marked by disenchantment in which individuals categorize facts or truth according to "the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber 1959: 139). To illuminate this concept, Weber employs the example of the street car. For most individuals who use it as a means of

\textsuperscript{168} Latour’s discussion of the modern impulse is meant to both delineate what characteristics we can attribute to modernity but more importantly to point out that many of the so-call modern characteristics or tenets are accompanied by impulses that appear to contradict them. The primary example that Latour employs is the purification/hybridization dialectic.
transportation, the street car's mechanical composition remains a mystery, but its riders are confident in the fact that should they pursue research on this topic, the mystery of how motion works is available to them (Weber 159: 139).

This logic is not unlike that of the progressive Christian who derives her theology from biblical criticism. The hermeneutical exposé is used as an authoritative measure of truth. While she may not understand the historical context or the philological interpretations, like Weber's street car rider, our progressive Christian assumes that were she to gather all of the necessary information (languages, history, etc.) that she would draw the same conclusion as the scholarly experts. Thus, she is able to validate her position based on the authority of the popular theological author (Spong, Vosper, etc.), who claims to have rigorously examined the scholarly evidence and has presented it in accessible format for the general public. Therefore, by using popular biblical criticism progressive Christians are able—and indeed encouraged—to reject certain biblical texts—for Joel, the Ten Commandments, for Deborah, the David and Goliath story, and for Suzan, the text of the bible itself must be jettisoned. The specific reasons for rejecting certain stories or passages of scripture are rooted in 'truths' revealed by scientific empiricism, biblical criticism, and liberal humanism, from which the justification employed is one that claims that their rewritten versions of the bible are more historically accurate and theologically authentic to a modern audience. Indeed, the necessity of the 'rewritten' version is in certain ways rendered superfluous as the progressive Christian community supports a vast and at times vague 'oral' tradition that doesn't actually involve text as a physical or material object. Instead, the focus turns to discussions and debates concerning which passages or texts should be eliminated and why such a procedure is necessary.
In discussing the modern impulse, Latour explains that moderns have endorsed a worldview that views the present as completely foreign to and separate from the past. This worldview is one that champions categorical divisions and sees fundamental differences between science and society without recognizing their mutual influence—the ultimate example, for Latour, being the creation of the atomic bomb, which might be pigeonholed as "just science" but in due course leads to the creation of a whole new social reality (see Latour 2003: 38-29). According to Latour, the scientific method introduces an understanding of the cosmos that serves as an object for investigation separate from socio-cultural phenomenon. In insisting that these two realms are wholly separate, the moderns usher in an era in which the proliferation of hybrids constructs an unacknowledged social reality composed of what Latour calls quasi-objects.\footnote{Latour develops this concept from the works of his mentor, Michel Serres.} For Latour, the presence and proliferation of hybrids signifies that 'we have never been modern' in the sense that projects of purification and the assumptions of critical analysis are utterly inconsistent with social realities in that they misrecognize their own effects of hybridization.

Adopting and extending Latour's theoretical model, progressive Christian reading practices in many ways resemble those orientations that Latour outlines in his discussion of the Modern Constitution. Keane (2007) extrapolates that the project of purification is not just about purity or originality, but rather it endorses a moral vision, which Keane calls 'the moral narrative of modernity.' This narrative presupposes and indeed endorses the notion of an autonomous self pursuing liberation from social, material and psychological distractions or entanglements (Elisha 2011: 19). Under this model, progressive Christians are not just seeking an authentic biblical text out of a desire for purity or originality, but more importantly out of an ethical drive to interact with the biblical text in its purest form.
Ultimately, for West Hill United Church the moral attachment to the text grew too difficult to decipher and the text posed too great of a distraction, as a result the text has been physically jettisoned from the place of primacy in their religious services. While the other churches in this study have not gone as far as West Hill United Church in terms of physically removing the bible from their services, their relationship to the text remains ambiguous at best.

"Jesus is different from us only in degree, not in kind," Pastor Dawn fondly reflects. Each time she makes this declaration she pauses and waits for the impact of this statement to sink in. Usually her congregants shift in their seats, a few nodding in approval. When I asked members of the congregation in formal interviews about the meaning of Pastor Dawn's statement, and whether or not they agree, the majority agreed with her and pointed towards other historical figures whom they feel likewise exemplify this notion of being different in degree rather than kind. Examples of these figures most often included Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Occasionally other examples included my research participants' parents, a kindly school teacher or former clergy person. For example, in a conversation that took place in the home of an older couple, Samantha and James, who attend Holy Cross Lutheran Church, we were in the midst of discussing whether or not Jesus could be considered unique. Samantha began by admitting that she was not sure about the uniqueness of Jesus but that she felt that Christianity's focus on Jesus could be considered a form of idolatry because it diverted attention away from, what they termed, 'God within us'. James clarified this notion by drawing from Spong:

I think Spong puts it well when he says, that he [Jesus] was so imbued with God, God was so present within him that he was such a complete human

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170 This has on several occasions been explained to me as a decision that has been made because the bible has traditionally held a place of primacy and been used as a tool for oppressing minorities and the disenfranchised. Providing a voice to those texts and traditions that have not historically had access to the central focus of the Christian religious service is important to the community.
being because of that. That is what we should aspire to. I'm not sure about the reference. I think Dr. Martin Luther King was certainly, and I heard a speaker at the Kairos convention and he was an American, he wasn't an evangelist, he was an American, he was a Christian, I can't remember. His main premise was that King was a prophet. And he said, King was the greatest American prophet that we've ever produced. I guess he would sort of be in the line with Jesus because Jesus was—you know, Muslims consider Jesus the greatest prophet of all. It's interesting, Gandhi? Gandhi once said, "I think Christians are great, I'd like to meet one." Or something like that. I don't know about Mandela? It's interesting. But Mandela certainly with his truth and reconciliation commissions, he took a different tactic than most people do. Most people when they get into positions of power like that usually wreak revenge on the people who have tormented them. He chose not to do that which I think says a lot about him.

Of interest to the subject matter of this chapter is that these figures can be located in history and that a specific story is told—much like the observation that the Jesus of liberal Christians is himself a liberal Christian, the Gandhi of progressive Christians holds all the same beliefs as progressive Christians themselves. Like the historical Jesus, the narrative of Gandhi—and that of the other figures discussed—is purified in such a way that the core values attributed to him are all that remain.

**Conclusion**

Progressive Christians approach the bible in such a way that maintains the authoritative framework of Protestant bible reading while rejecting its message and teachings; alternatively they allow biblical criticism to assume the space of primacy once held by the bible itself. I have argued that progressive Christians are haunted by the bible. In that even their best attempts to move past it—either by rejecting it or rationalizing it—are directed by interpretive practices that originate with biblical reading and interpretative practices. It is a text that is both an obstacle to be overcome and an artefact to be explored and excavated, whose deepest crevices might be mined for truth and authenticity by the
ambitious miner. And like all mines, it must ultimately be abandoned in favour of newer mines with more easily accessible reserves when it no longer yields raw resources.

With this in mind, I suggest that the approach adopted by progressive Christians in their biblical analysis is one that extends to all of their religious thinking. While not a only the case for progressive Christians, their emphasis on text and language as 'raw resources' capable of being examined has led to a linguistic ideology in which the adherent perceives him or herself as capable of evaluating the character of a person, text or experience and deciphering the 'true' or 'original' intention therein (see Keane 2007: 62).

In this chapter I have outlined the motivations and the methods employed by progressive Christians in their approach to biblical texts. My fieldwork reveals that this approach is not always easy for the progressive Christian to assume. In many instances, as I will show in my subsequent chapter, exposure to biblical criticism and the ensuing progressive Christian theology is experienced as a loss and a traumatic experience. The progressive Christian often must make a decision to abandon theological beliefs that they have held since childhood. In my next chapter, I will draw upon the work of scholars who look at 'deconversion' as a means through which this loss might be rhetorically expressed. Furthermore, I will investigate the process of 'othering' that occurs within progressive Christian communities in relation to how they perceive conservative and evangelical Christianities. I will argue that for many progressive Christians these other forms of Christianity become a core component of progressive Christianity precisely because they are presented as the type of Christianity from which the progressive Christian has departed, or deconverted.
Chapter 4 - Deconversion: Progressive Christians and the Protestant Proximate Other

She stands in front of the congregation, trembling ever so slightly. She looks down, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and begins:

"My name is Monica James and I am a recovering Christian."

Monica invites us into her story, which consists of an overbearing and relentless mother, an alcoholic and distant father; years spent trying to fit in at an expensive Christian private school that her family couldn't afford; Bible College in Toronto; the perfect Christian marriage; the perfect Christian family. The day her son accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour was, she declared, the best day of her life. Monica's story of the perfect Christian life is balanced by insecurities and inadequacy, including a sense that she could never measure up, could never assume the role of the perfect Christian daughter, mother and wife.

"I would pray that my parents would divorce, that they would stay together, that I would be the greatest Gospel Singer in the world, that I would marry rich. I wanted to be a super-Christian—I wanted security. I spent a lot of time sitting on my hands, not asking questions. I wish I could point my conversion to faithlessness to some sort of terminal illness or car crash, but nothing like that has happened. The universe has smiled on me and I have three wonderful children and a husband I love dearly. It really was a slow ebbing away that has occurred over the last eighteen to twenty-four months. Through conversations with my friends and family, with complete strangers, the bricks began to fall. I no longer seek

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171 As always, the name of the interlocutor has been changed in order to protect her privacy. This snap-shot is reconstructed from field-notes taken during and after Monica's presentation. While I have tried to replicate as accurately as possible Monica's wording, it is not an exact transcription.
salvation, because I think that's archaic. And"—she pauses, leans forward, and speaks in a barely audible whisper—"I feel so good now!"

Monica, a life coach and a bible college drop-out, shared her story with a room of twenty to thirty like-minded Christians at a progressive Christian conference in a presentation titled: "Losing My Religion and Finding My Soul." After leading the group through a conversation about loss and grief management, she identified herself as existing in a liminal space. "It's like being a trapeze artist, you have to let go and you don't know what comes next, but you have to grab the next rung and trust that it will be there for you."

Monica's description of her experience in abandoning her religious upbringing and her later adoption of progressive Christianity can be classified as what scholars and practitioners of contemporary Christianity call 'deconversion' narratives (Barbour 1994; Bielo 2009b; 2011:28-46; Harrold 2006; Streib et al. 2009; Wright et. al. 2007). While there are great similarities between the 'deconversion' narrative and what is traditionally identified as a conversion narrative certain differences exist. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which deconversion narratives are performed and the type of subjectivity they presume. For example, as Bielo explains, conversion narratives are "marked by teleology, a straight line of change from rebellion to obedience" whereas a deconversion narrative posits a distance between one's current and former stance. It is marked by a "cultural critique" of one's former beliefs and practices as well as an explanation of the type of religiosity that an individual no longer accepts and the process of resolving and responding to the shortcomings of their previous religious stance (Bielo 2011a: 29). In this chapter, I focus on the discursive practices through which progressive Christian deconversion narratives are constructed and their perceived value to both the individual adherent and the larger community. Much like
conversion, which suggests a dramatic transformation of the self, deconversion offers scholars of religion insight into how the religious subject is constituted (see Keane 2002: 65). While the majority of research on deconversion narratives within the anthropology of Christianity has focused on evangelical and emerging forms of Christianity (see especially Bielo 2009b; 2011 and Harrold 2006), I argue that the term is especially useful as a means of understanding the ways in which progressive Christianity constructed in opposition to, what I call, following Jonathan Z. Smith (2004a: 253), the 'Protestant proximate other'.

I employ this term—Protestant proximate other—for two reasons: first, it fits well with Smith's description of the 'proximate other' as being the prototype in relation to which communities and individuals construct their identity through a process of comparison and differentiation. In describing the proximate other, Smith points to the fact that the category of otherness is based on relationships of reciprocity and is always situational. 'Otherness' is a category bestowed upon another individual or community or upon one's own past (as in the case of many of the progressive Christians featured in this dissertation) and involves a process of discernment and/or judgment (2004a: 274-75). This specific process of 'othering' is important because, as I will show, the category reveals almost nothing about the 'other' but much about those who assign this status of 'otherness.' According to Smith, "a 'theory of the other' is but another way of phrasing a 'theory of the self'” (2004a: 275). The proximate other enables a 'theory of self' generated in comparison to others from one's own group or tradition. As Smith explains, starting with Paul, arguments concerning otherness have been directed by Christians towards other Christians throughout history (also on some occasions towards 'near Christians' construed as monotheists). A proximate other is especially telling because it introduces an opportunity to create a hierarchy generated through the expression of
difference. In many instances, as in the case with progressive Christians, the creation of hierarchies of difference becomes an impulse—one which presumably enables those generating a theory of self and deciphering the proximate other to place their own group or tradition at the top of this hierarchy, or alternatively, to critique oneself or one's group.

To illustrate this creation of a hierarchy for progressive Christians, I return to an example offered in Chapter Three of this dissertation involving Jerry's recounting to me his conversation at a dinner party in which one of the guests suggested that differences within Christianity are moot because ultimately they all worship the same God. Jerry reacted strongly to this suggestion by pointing out that he did not believe that different factions of Christianity are comparable in regards to their relationship with or veneration of God. He recounted his response as follows: "I'm sorry, but the God that you Roman Catholics relate to is not my God. And the one of the Baptists is certainly not my God. And the God of the Pentecostals is certainly not my God! The Anglican God is sort of... depends which: Spong Anglicans or the other Anglicans." Jerry clearly creates a hierarchy here that places Baptists and Pentecostals at the bottom because their God is "certainly not" Jerry's God. Next in the hierarchy are the Roman Catholics and then Anglicans, whose position at the top of the list is contingent upon whether or not they are found to be "Spong Anglicans" (see Chapter 3).

My second reason for using the term, Protestant proximate other, is that it enables me to distance my own categories from the categories that the progressive Christians featured in this study use to describe their Protestant proximate other. For them, terms like evangelical, conservative, fundamentalist, charismatic and the Christian Right are often employed

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172 One example that Smith uses is that of the wine connoisseur who does not need to extend effort in differentiating between white and red wine as the differences are apparent. When considering two wines of the same make from different vineyards and vintages, however, our connoisseur is expected to spend a great deal of effort deliberating between the two and bases his reputation upon his ability to distinguish between them (Smith 2004b: 27).
interchangeably and without the nuanced definitions that scholars of religion might otherwise prefer. The term 'Protestant proximate other' allows me to explore their relationships with other factions of contemporary Christianity without adopting their own descriptions and categories, which are problematic because they rely on stereotypes and caricatures.

To offer just one example, in a conversation with one of the members of George Street United Church's reading group, Alan, a retired Anglican priest, who attended the reading group but was a parishioner at a local Anglican church in Peterborough and I discussed the rise of the Religious Right in the American politics. Alan reflected on a variety of points including the impetus for a more conservative theological stance, its financial affluence, and popularity with a younger generation:

I suspect that the ultra-conservative are in fear, as they see things breaking down around them, you always fight hardest just before everything is collapses around you. I don't know whether that's wishful thinking or whether it's factual but I suspect that there might be something to it. The other thing is that they seem to have an awful lot of money to spend and there's a lot of sheer entertainment value in a lot of these fundamentalist churches. The message is sort of slipped in with it. The fundamentalists can spend money on having really expensive production value for teenagers, that the other churches don't seem to have. I'm not sure where the money is coming from? Part of it is because in the fundamentalist church you really are absorbed into the church, that's where you spend your money, your time and everything else. You don't have other things going on in your life. You can just give it all to the expression. Basically, I'm holding suppositions, I really don't know, but I don't think the growth in right-wing Christianity is sustainable and I don't think it's as strong as appearances would indicate.

In many ways, Alan's discussion of conservative Christianity is nuanced. He finishes his comments by pointing out that in the end he is not really sure and cannot speak from personal experience. Alan's comments are highly representative of comments I encountered concerning conservative and evangelical Christians throughout my fieldwork.
Throughout my fieldwork, I was often struck by the fact that progressive Christians did not direct their attention to and critique towards liberal Christianity but rather towards evangelicals, charismatics and the Christian Right as epitomized by American evangelicalisms. While liberal Christianity is more ideologically proximate and progressive Christians do critique its practices and beliefs (see Introduction), the majority of their conversations revolved around an evangelical or conservative Christian variant. In my view, this may emerge out of a sense of spatial proximity in terms of a discursive field. Evangelicals are perceived to be more politically provocative and now more powerful than liberal Christians and therefore occupy the public spaces in which progressive Christians would like to engage. Additionally interesting is their focus upon American as opposed to Canadian evangelicals, a focus which is often fueled by social media and twenty-four hour newsfeeds. Once again, it is American evangelicals and not Canadian evangelicals who are prominent in the public sphere and perceived to be a problem.\footnote{Within the Canadian political landscape, it is the perceived threat of American-styled evangelicalism emerging out of the grassroots of the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance that is alarmist and anxiety inducing as revealed by Marci Macdonald's \textit{The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada} (2010).}

In this chapter I explore the relationships—real and imagined—between progressive Christians and their Protestant proximate other. I argue that a progressive Christian focus on their Protestant proximate other facilitates the fabrication or amplification of their own original way of being Christian, which thereby contributes to and is used as the foundation for the current manifestation of their individual and collective identities. I further contend that this way of being Christian is strengthened through the application of a deconversion narrative, which organizes and maintains their current way of being Christian in juxtaposition
to a former, original one, in addition to directing their moral or ethical positions and determining the type of future they imagine for themselves.  

Modern Religious Modalities: Liberals, Evangelicals and the Protestant Proximate Other

Only certain religious discourses are interpreted by public figures as compatible with the modern public sphere—i.e., those traditions which have assumed the premises of liberal discourses and are willing to enter into rational debates (Asad 2003: 183; cf. Casanova 1994). For the most part, liberal religions have encouraged and cooperated with such modern discursive practices. These traditions have followed a trajectory that has created space for inter-religious dialogue, inclusivity and, especially within Canada, the encouragement of government control of social activities—such as health care, education and social services—that had previously been the domain of liberal religious groups, such as the social gospel, as discussed in Chapter One. William Hutchison explains in his classic text, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (1976), that modern liberal religion is characterized by an intentional adaptation to contemporary culture. This adaptation is usually met by a rejection of biblical literalism, as well as the belief that God's immanence is revealed through cultural development. Liberal Christianity has traditionally posited a postmillennial vision through which social salvation is emphasized as the means to accessing the Kingdom of God (Hutchison 1976: 2; see also Lofton 2006: 374-75). Similar to contemporary progressive Christians, their modernist predecessors were marked by their beliefs and disbeliefs.  

174 Of course this is not the only explanation of deconversion narratives, which when examined in the context of evangelical Christianity, for example, they often fulfill very different purposes. Even within progressive Christianity the deconversion narrative may enable a juxtaposition with other identities and other narratives (such as justifying a departure from a more secular worldview or from liberal Christianity). Regardless, in the context of my fieldwork I found the use of deconversion narratives to chronologically place the individual and the community between a former Protestant proximate other and a yet to be achieved atheistic future to be the most predominant.
Rejecting belief as the primary marker of Christianity, modernists advocated for the position that the methodologies through which beliefs are determined are what is most important.175

This appeal to methodology and motive remains the most important consideration among progressive Christians as is indicated by the subtitle of Vosper's popular book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe* (2009). It is somewhat difficult to decipher why practices or lifestyle are more important to progressive Christians. Certainly in conversations about what it means to be a progressive Christian they would often point to Vosper's subtitle as well as to the social justice activities in which their churches are engaged. Additionally, this focus on practices and lifestyles allows and enables more flexibility concerning what one does and does not believe. I also suspect that this emphasis on methodology is rooted in a familiarity with the study of religion as an academic discipline. All in all, a progressive Christian focus on practices, lifestyle and narrative provides rich modalities for both scholars and adherents to define religiosity. It is important to note, however, that when differentiating themselves from evangelicals, and when asked to

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175 This theme is recurrent in the writings of both liberal lay leaders and theologians throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. As an example I offer the reflections of Cyril W. Emmett, who wrote the following just before his death, in the *Journal of Religion* (1922):

Any given Modernist may or may not believe in the Virgin Birth, or the empty tomb, or the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel. The essence of modernism lies not in its conclusions, but in the way they are reached and the temper in which they are held. Modernists agree that we can no longer appeal to the authority of the Bible, creeds or church as something fixed and decisive; they agree that the Spirit of God is speaking in divers channels and by diverse voices and that we must be ready to hear all that He saith to the churches; and they agree that truth flourishes best in an atmosphere of freedom and that the church must be brave enough to suffer a great variety of opinions within its walls (quoted in Lofton 2006: 378).

Emmett was the Vice Principal of Ripon College, and as an ordained clergyman and a biblical scholar he wrote several articles and inspired the work of Canadian-born Lily Dougall, a leading Anglican modernist from the early twentieth century (Deane 2007: 268). This example is telling because it reveals that many of the arguments proposed by progressive Christianity are not necessarily as novel or innovative as many progressive Christians assume. This example bolsters Bishop John Spong’s point that everything he teaches in his lectures and his books has, in fact, been taught in mainline seminaries for the past fifty years.
define progressive Christianity, my subjects of study predominately focus on differences of belief.

Drawing upon Hutchison’s work, historian of religion Kathryn Lofton points out that while modernist Protestants certainly espoused the 'eschatological triad' of adaptation, immanence and progress, their writings focused primarily upon the means rather than the ends of inquiry and cross-examination of the Christian faith and biblical narrative. Lofton describes their works as "missionary texts, designed to incite a generation of ponderous questions and pontificating replies," and argues that "the process of believing is emphasized over and above the definitive dogma." To state it more explicitly, Lofton explains that for self-proclaimed modernists, much like Vosper, "how you believe . . . was your belief." (Lofton 2006: 378).

This understanding of belief as a process stands in contrast to the modern privatized and Christian-derived conception of religion, which Asad points out is central to Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion that has been adopted by a generation of scholars and intellectuals who came after him. According to Asad, Geertz "emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world" (1993: 47). In resolving the potential split between beliefs and practices, I find the suggestion of Anna Strhan, who follows David Morgan (2010), to be helpful in that it challenges the implied separation between beliefs and practices and instead seeks to reveal a "conception of believing as itself a form of embodied practice" (Strhan 2011: 2). In offering this understanding of belief as practice, Strhan points to Morgan's discussion of belief as:

A broad orientation that emerges from the habits absorbed in childhood or at other times in life such as conversionary periods when, like learning a new language, the mind is powerfully opened under conditions of duress or crisis to absorbing fundamental new patterns. Belief is a shared imaginary, a
communal set of practices that structure life in powerfully aesthetic terms. Belief is perhaps best framed as a pervasive community of feeling because the holding that it involves is public and verifiable when it consists of hold to other people and the institutions they share (Morgan 2010: 7).

Morgan's definition, which resembles Bourdieu's use of the term *habitus*, is just as applicable to progressive Christians, part of what we might term 'mainline' Christianity, as it is to evangelical Anglicans featured in Strhan's research. Moreover, Morgan's definition also enables me to work within the categories and definitions provided by my subjects of study themselves, while also recognizing that belief remains central to Christian conceptions of subjecthood, albeit as a convergence of privatized cognitive assertions and community praxis, narratives and lifestyles.

For the progressive Christians I study, belief is unsettled by a focus on these three devices—praxis, narrative and lifestyle—which while directing belief also stand as independent components of religious engagement. Pamela Klassen (1994), for example, discovered during her study of the religious motivations of two Mennonite women that one of the women's driving forces for joining the church was to provide herself with a venue in which she could sing and an architectural and ritual setting in which she felt comfortable. Klassen labels this an embodied and, in this case, gendered experience that emerges out of personal narratives. In commenting, Klassen explains, "a story is not only (or not at all) an abstraction from experience meant to bear systemic conceptions. Stories convey past and present emotions, contradictions, and pieces of lives that fit and do not fit into cultural patterns" (Klassen 1994: 123). Similarly, the example of Monica above, supports this notion that stories, practices and lifestyles might both unsettle belief as well as create a bridge to it. To a certain extent, Monica's story is a story that reflects a desire to be unsettled and in the end, losing her religion is better than losing her family. Her loss of faith is as much about her
experiences as a daughter, mother and wife as it is about her ability or inability to assent to theological and doctrinal beliefs. While also a story about losing her religion (as the title of her presentation suggests), Monica is recounting the story of her transition from a conservative evangelical form of Christianity to a mainline liberal variety.

Roughly a quarter of Christians in North America might be classified as 'mainline' Protestants—twenty-six percent in the United States and twenty-three percent in Canada (Ammerman 2005: 4-5; Bibby 2002: 74-75). This group, whose very name 'mainline' divulges their claim to the centre, has been gradually losing its hold on the privileged position of what we might imagine to be normative North American Christianity, according to sociologists of religion. As Nancy Ammerman explains, mainline churches are distinguished by their moderate-to-liberal theological and social stances. While a great deal of diversity exists within this tradition, mainline churches are marked by the following: their common history and organizational structures; their general orientation towards tolerance, practicality and acceptability; and the fact that the majority of their congregants have been middle-class for several generations (Ammerman 2005: 4-5). Although they have traditionally positioned themselves at the centre of North American religious life, mainline churches must now contend with the fact that they are outnumbered two-to-one by conservative denominations, groups which have adopted similar organizational structures and whose congregants are increasingly also middle-class (Ammerman 2005: 4-5). Indeed, evangelical and conservative brands of Christianity are now often understood as the

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176 Ammerman's text draws upon a multi-scholar research project conducted in conjunction with the Hartford Institute for Religion Research featuring over 300,000 congregations across the United States. Bibby's research is comprised of seven separate surveys—"Project Canada"—conducted between 1984 and 2008. Detailed information about each of these studies can be found on their organizational websites: <http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/index.html> and <http://www.reginaldbibby.com/reginaldwbibby.html>. (Both Accessed Nov 16, 2011).
normative religion in North America—a point which led Alan Wolfe to explain in his popular look at the American religious landscape that there is "a sense in which we are all evangelicals now" (Wolfe 2003:36; see also Clark 2003). Thus, while Asad's claim remains true, that those traditions that are able to engage in dialogue with neoliberal and rational discourse find a voice in the public sphere, it is evangelicalism rather than mainline Christianity that appears to hold the most weight and exert the most force upon contemporary public spaces.

In contrast to mainline Christianity, evangelical narratives of modern Christianity have centered on an individualist experience or interaction with the divine that focuses its energies upon the desired end of personal transformation of the non-believer to believer, the unsaved to the saved. This end is represented as a conscious choice that in many ways has come to characterize contemporary Christianity. According to Webb Keane (2007), missionary activity played a crucial role in the establishment of this representation of the Protestant self because it necessitated an understanding of conversion as a rupture that brought the convert into a new historical trajectory (2007: 199). The missionary, or evangelistic, approach requires a conversion experience that is brought about through the proselytization by a believer to a potential convert but ultimately assumes that all agency rests with God and the would-be adherent. In the conversion schema, while a new being has been constructed, a continuous fear remains that the neophyte might 'backslide' into his or her old orientation, a fear which is mitigated by evangelical Protestants through a continuous process of self-examination and personal confession. Keane acknowledges that a focus on the experience of the individual and on sincerity is not specific to modern varieties of

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177 In anthropological theory this notion might be traced to the Durkheimian school of thought (1898 [1975]; See Lukes 1995).
Christianity; however, he argues that the fact that interior analysis and transformation stand as the primary concerns and methods for all adherents, not just intellectuals or the religious elite, is particular to modern varieties of Protestantism (2007: 201).

As we have seen, Progressive Christians who reject the (traditionally) central tenets of Christian belief define themselves according to what they are not (the evangelical Christian Right) and what they do not believe (traditional Christian tenets), rather than what they are and what they do believe. As such, the primary representation of their collective and individual Christianities revolves around an antithetical construction, one formed in resistance to, and in competition with, public representations of the Christian Right. I posit that the characteristics of this Protestant proximate other are a measuring stick to which progressive Christians construct their version of Christianity in opposition, a practice that Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) shows is increasingly adopted by religious groups in North America (2003: 45).

What I find most interesting is that actual Protestant proximate others, much like actual biblical texts, are not as accessible to progressive Christians as one might assume. Throughout my fieldwork the problem of the evangelical/fundamentalist Other or the Christian Right was referred to regularly. In fact, when examining progressive Christian promotional material, I had initially assumed that the majority of the progressive Christians whom I would be meeting had grown up in conservative, evangelical or fundamentalist communities. For example, in the 'Living the Questions' video series, in which I participated with Holy Cross Lutheran Church, was a program called 'Saving Jesus.' Included

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178 After I finished my fieldwork at George Street United Church and before I arrived at St. Matthias Anglican Church, both of these communities also hosted 'Living the Questions' studies. West Hill United Church has also used this study guide for group studies in the past but currently claims that at this point they have moved beyond its theology (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of what it means to 'move beyond' certain theological tenets).
in the promotional material distributed at the church was a flyer that asked the would-be participant: "Ever feel that Jesus has been kidnapped by the Christian Right?" An advertisement with similar wording (Figure 6) caused a stir in progressive Christian circles when it was rejected by *Sports Illustrated* magazine as too controversial.\(^{179}\)

![Figure 6](http://livingthequestionsonline.wordpress.com/2011/01/28/lts-jesus-jars-sports-illustrated-angers-portland-radio-listeners/) (Accessed April 20, 2011).

The title of the 'Living the Questions' series—based upon books by lesbian-feminist theologian, Episcopal priest and retired professor at Episcopal Divinity School, Carter Heyward and United Church of Christ pastor and professor at Oklahoma City University, Robin R. Meyers—suggests an adversarial relationship with the 'Christian Right'.\(^{180}\)

In a similar fashion, certain leaders and figureheads associated with the Christian Right—namely Jerry Falwell, Pat Robinson, George W. Bush and Ted Haggart—were referenced often in discussions about the type of Christianity that progressive Christians rejected. With this in mind, I was surprised to discover that their access to these communities was limited—primarily their information about what the Christian Right does and believes is


based upon television broadcasts, left-leaning media, films and YouTube footage.\footnote{For example during one of the book study sessions at West Hill United Church the group viewed clips from the documentary 'Jesus Camp' (2006). Although I missed this session, many of the members of the book study shared their reflections on the film with me. For the most part the consensus was that they were horrified at the theological teachings and political activism in which the documentary's interlocutors—charismatic and Pentecostal Christians—participated and encouraged their children to likewise partake. There are several problems with the film and misunderstandings about its subject matter, the most important of which for my discussion is that the film looks at a very specific brand of charismatic Christianity, which it then implies is representative of American evangelicalism. In many ways, a film like 'Jesus Camp' helps to reify the misconceptions about evangelicals and other conservatives that progressive Christians hold. Some of my interlocutors assumed that 'Jesus Camp' is representative of all evangelicals or American Christians.}  While some reported to have been involved in evangelical or conservative Christianity during their youth, the majority had left those communities long before they began to frequent progressive Christian ones. Overall, with some notable exceptions like Monica (above) and Stewart (below), most of the participants in this study grew up in mainline churches or fairly liberal Roman Catholic ones.\footnote{The fact that the majority of the participants in this study grew up in mainline or Roman Catholic churches might be due to the fact that this research was conducted in Canada which by and large has far fewer evangelical and conservative Christian churches. The practice of defining oneself in opposition to and competition with another religious community is one that has a long historical precedent, especially in the province of Ontario (where the majority of this research was conducted). The divides between Protestant and Catholic and more importantly between English-speaking and Francophone still resonate in the province of Ontario's governmental policies and province's perception of itself. That being said, given my observations of and conversations with progressive Christians in America, the construction of a Protestant proximate other is prevalent within American manifestations of progressive Christianity. The majority of the materials used by progressive Christians—such as the 'Living the Questions' series and works by authors such as Spong, Borg and Crossan—assume a divide and competition between progressive and evangelical Christianity. Indeed it is often from these American sources that the progressive Christians featured in this study draw their conclusions about evangelicals and the Christian Right.}

This observation is particularly interesting when explored alongside the deconversion narratives that I observed within these communities. My fieldwork reveals that their primary understanding and representation of the progressive Christian experience—both collectively and individually—is one of having prevailed over a form of deception perpetrated by both their Protestant proximate other and their own clerical leaders. In other words, my subjects report that the established, traditional church has been engaged in a conspiracy of concealing the 'truth' from congregants, but that through their engagement with popular texts that
critically examine biblical narratives and scientific realities they have escaped this restrictive belief system. In explaining the process through which they were able to uncover this conspiracy, many of my interlocutors emphasized that they had undergone a transformation. In doing so, they related a very specific type of 'deconversion narrative', classified as such because of its emphasis upon the former or original way of being Christian (Protestant proximate other) in juxtaposition to their new version of Christianity. This narrative is especially interesting because despite the fact they claim a former or original way of being Christian which is aligned with evangelicalism, in most cases, the progressive Christians featured in this study are not explicitly departing from evangelicalism, the Christian Right or fundamentalisms. In contrast to the bulk of scholarship on deconversion, which has focused on evangelicals and conservatives, the progressive Christians that I study are unique in that they have maintained their institutional affiliations with Christianity. Indeed, the majority of my subjects grew up and undertook their transformation/deconversion within mainline denominations—Anglicans, United Church of Canada, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Presbyterians.

The group dynamics discussed above lead to the central question of this chapter: Why and how do the members of this movement retain a Christian identity? While it might seem more plausible to simply abandon Christianity and adopt secular humanism, progressive Christians maintain their Christian identity, albeit as atheists, deviants and heretics. In many ways this self-representation stems from Protestant notions of rupture for the sake of continuity—at its origins, Protestantism understands itself as having created a rupture with a corrupt tradition in order to renew continuity with the "original" church. Similarly this rupture conflates with continuity through the proselytizing process of bringing the formerly
unsaved into a new historical trajectory, as is the case in the missionary and colonial fields (see Keane 2002: 66). As I explained in the previous chapter, following a Protestant impulse of purification, progressive Christians have sought to employ biblical criticism to expose and reverse this corruption—through biblical criticism they maintain that it is possible to determine the core of Christianity with which they are able to separate the wheat from the chaff, to employ a biblical metaphor. The unintended effect of this continual process of examination, purification and reconstitution is that they ultimately are left with very little of the biblical narrative and faith tradition with which to attend.

The progressive Christians whom I study have told me on more than one occasion that their faith has been "saved" by the progressive theologies they hold, without which, many of them claim, they would not be Christians at all. Thus it is through rejecting core components of Christianity that they maintain their Christian subjecthood. Much like their Protestant proximate other, progressive Christians often insist on proselytizing their non-theistic gospel to other Christians in hopes that the rest of Christianity will adopt their methodology and worldview.¹⁸³ Not only do they persist in claiming a to be Christian but they also do so within the edifice—the symbols, rhetoric, and even the buildings—of contemporary North American Christianity. Within the realm of collaborative reading and interpretative practices progressive Christians seek to delineate what it means to be a progressive Christian. This is a process of reading that is modelled on the traditionally evangelical practices of communal bible reading and small group discussions (Wuthnow 1994). As in the evangelical tradition, this process of reading, contemplating and discussing is one of their most important religious activities, and it is through this process that they

¹⁸³ For the most part their proselytization takes a passive form. Progressive Christians share the texts they are reading—those by authors like Spong and others—with their more conservative Christian friends and family members.
articulate a form of Christianity based on resistance toward traditional and conservative representations of Christianity. Progressive Christians perceive themselves to be heretics or deviants from the normative form of Christianity, and they internalise progressive Christianity by constructing an individual personal narrative of departure: a movement away from a more traditional or conservative version of Christianity. In certain ways, recounting this narrative becomes the means through which they are able to reinforce their current position, which is intentionally heretical, deviant, and on the periphery. As such, this position requires continual maintenance.\(^{184}\)

**Deconversion**

Many of the cognitive frameworks posited by evangelical Protestantism, such as the beliefs and language surrounding the atonement, situate Christian identity in a dramatic conversion experience (being born again) and the individual agency involved in this procedure (see Smilde 2007 concerning the sociology of conversion). With this in mind, rejecting this version of Christianity necessitates for progressive Christians an equally sensational and calculated process of 'deconversion' (Barbour 1994; Bielo 2009b; Harrold 2006; Streib et al. 2009; Wright et al. 2007). Although, as in the case of Monica, for progressive Christians the dramatics associated with deconversion are not as pronounced as with a conversion. Instead, the process of deconversion is interpreted as an intellectual one.

\(^{184}\) As discussed in Chapter Two, an additional struggle occurs between the different communities featured in this study. While they seek to differentiate and distance themselves from their Protestant proximate other, progressive Christians likewise disagree about the different beliefs and practices of different communities. For example, as noted in Chapter Two, the members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church felt that Gretta Vosper and West Hill United Church were 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. Other individuals and communities have sought to position themselves in relation to others within progressive Christianity. Statements such as 'I am not as far in my theological thinking' and 'we aren't ready to move that direction' are common within progressive Christian discourse. I am especially interested in that ways that this type of language denotes temporal movement and an evolution of beliefs and practices and explore this topic in detail in chapter five of this dissertation.
involving both beliefs and a moment of cognitive crisis, which the adherent identifies as self-transforming. As such, it mirrors, and in some cases adopts, the more traditional conversion rhetoric of 'born again' evangelical Christians.

Omri Elisha (2008) notes that when asked what it means to be a Christian, most evangelical Protestants in North America will respond with personal rather than doctrinal points. Elisha explains that rather than reciting core 'beliefs' derived from the Apostles Creed or other standard Christian doctrines, one is more likely to encounter personal conversion narratives or individualized testimonies recounting a believer's experience of having been 'born again.' This account usually includes "intimate details of sins committed and lives redeemed through the 'surrendering' of oneself to God" (Elisha 2008: 57). Elisha's point is that evangelicals understand their Christian faith, as explicitly related to a personal experience that is not only linked to doctrinal beliefs but also resides in a balance between the practice of performative rituals and disciplines intended to instill moral character. In many ways a traditional Protestantism positions itself ontologically through a propositional assent to the primacy of Jesus within their lives. While conversion most certainly involves specific cognitive beliefs about the role of Jesus and about Christian subjecthood, the focus is ultimately experiential and tied to a specific and personal narrative that is presented as unique to each adherent. For example, evangelicals speak of having a 'personal relationship with Jesus' or of having 'invited Jesus into their hearts'.

Likewise, for liberal Protestants, Jesus retains an important role. Many liberal Protestants reject what they perceive to be the enthusiasms of evangelical and charismatic

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185 Evangelicals often claim that their worship services are without ritual, but as Stromberg (1993: 3) and Elisha (2008: 59) both observe, activities such as bible studies or the sharing of one's testimony serve as discursive rituals for the purposes of indoctrination. Elisha also identifies among charismatics the various 'gifts of the spirit' (e.g. prophecy, tongues, healing) as rituals that reinforce a reconstituted notion of the self (Elisha 2008: 63).
Christians but do not reject the central role of Jesus in their lives. Liberal Christians will often speak of 'following the example of Jesus' and focus on those New Testament stories in which Jesus is depicted as helping the downtrodden and challenging corrupt political systems. In each of these instances, for both the evangelical and the liberal Protestant, the central role of Jesus in determining the individual believer's Christian identity is reinforced through beliefs and practices that continuously allow the believer to reflect upon and recount the instance when they adopted their particular way of 'being Christian' and how this decision has affected their lives.

Streib et al. (2009: 30) contend that Western forms of religiosity and religious affiliation are marked by a fluid and on-going need for decision-making (cf. Mannheim 1936: 7-8). This notion relates to an expansion of what Peter Berger first identified as the 'heretical imperative' (Berger 1979). Berger suggests that the modern project involves a shift from certainty to choice, a shift which he calls the heretical imperative. Specifically concerning religion, Berger points to a removal of certain religious or cosmological plausibility structures that have resulted a state in which religious affiliation is now marked by a directive to choose one's religious affiliation. As such, human agency and choice becomes the normative means through which the Christian narrative is interpreted and re-produced.

While Berger's earlier works point to secularization as the determinant that enables the 'heretical imperative', this interpretation has recently been challenged by many scholars and former advocates of the theory, including Berger himself (Berger 1999; Brown 2001; Martin 2005; Stark 1999; Taylor 2007; see Dalferth 2010 for a discussion of post-secularism). With this in mind, the heretical imperative opens up other venues in which the imperative to choose creates new ways to be both religious and non-religious. John Barbour
(1994), the scholar who first coined the term 'deconversion', argues that deconversion should be distinguished from secularization because it involves "the narration of significant events that call a faith into question, an analysis of choices, and usually a rather dramatic reversal: one's former faith is presented as not just irrelevant but as wrong or misguided" (2-3). Along with constituting a dramatic reversal Barbour explains that part of the deconversion experience is a focus upon the active choice to digress from a religious tradition. In contrast, secularization, according to Barbour, even when examined on the level of an individual adherent, stands as a natural fading away of beliefs or perhaps more distinctly a diminishing of the significance attached to religious activities and beliefs. Furthermore, deconversion, unlike secularization, often entails a process that leads to a new religious stance, as well as an identifiable loss of one's former religious worldview. Barbour cautions that it should not be thought of as switching religious affiliations since the focus and impetus for action is rooted in a dramatic narrative of doubt and interior analysis (cf. Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997).

Barbour identifies four characteristics that contribute to, and are used by, a former adherent to justify or explain his or her deconversion: intellectual doubt, moral criticism,
emotional suffering and disaffiliation from a community.\textsuperscript{187} While many factors contribute to 'the turning from' a faith tradition, scholars who study the phenomenon have focused on the fact that the contemporary individual is understood primarily as a meaning-making agent, and consequently meaning-making is seen as the primary purpose of religious adherence.\textsuperscript{188} A deconversion narrative is lengthy in its retelling and emphasizes the loss of the old self and a rejection of the former religious affiliation, especially its authoritative patterns. The narrator will often attempt to chronologically arrange their life in such a way that they 'pinpoint' certain instances which led to the ultimate deconversion. The narrative itself serves to reify the transformation which it is recounting. This is not unlike the performativity ingrained in a conversion narrative, which, as Peter Stromberg (1993) argues, is a continuous process created and reaffirmed in the telling or recitation of the narrative itself.

Drawing on Barbour's categories, my research reveals that the majority of progressive Christian deconversion narratives focus on the first two factors, 'intellectual doubt' and 'moral criticism', which are often interlinked under the rubric of an 'ethics of belief' (see also Chapter Five). When a religious narrative is perceived as no longer intellectually viable—either because it is seen as irreconcilable with scientific knowledge or with biblical scholarship—or morally admissible—such as in instances where religious doctrines conflict with social norms—the act of deconverting becomes an ethical one. An individual is morally

\textsuperscript{187} Streib et al. add 'loss of religious experience' (2009: 22) to these four. This seems most applicable to those who have not deconverted to another tradition or way of being religious (as in the progressive Christians whom I am studying). Discussions of those who have left the church (what John Spong refers to as 'the Church Alumni Association' or 'Believers in Exile') are prominent in progressive Christian circles and the topic came up often in my interviews. For the most part, the progressive Christians whom I interviewed cite the fact that the church is 'irrelevant' in reference to the primary reason for many for having left Christianity.

\textsuperscript{188} Writing about deconversion in the Emerging Church in New Zealand, Phillip Harrod (2006) identifies 'turning from' as the dominant orientation of postmodern religious autobiographical narratives. Harrold points out that when rooted in a narrative of transformation, deconversion, or turning, much of the individual's religious affiliation in the contemporary religious marketplace is determined by the interpretation of what the individual understands him or herself as deconverting or turning from (79).
obliged to possess sufficient evidence with which to account for his or her beliefs (Barbour 1994: 56). In the absence of this evidence, the individual must abandon or retool her belief system.

My use of the deconversion model departs from the ways in which the majority of sociologists and anthropologists of Christianity have employed it because I focus on liberal, rather than evangelical or charismatic Christianities. In comparing deconversion narratives among emerging church adherents to those explored by Barbour, Harrold (2006) points out that the deconversion narrative constitutes a continual focus on the tradition, emotions and experience from which one has departed—in this way the past remains present in the current moment by dictating those elements of religiosity with which the current state is to be compared. According to Harrold, what is "recognizable are struggles with originative patterns of thought, feeling, or action which seekers identified with, perhaps uncritically, prior to the onset of their journeys. Even when a new spiritual home is found, personal narratives continue to emphasize rejection or loss of the old self and its religious associations" (2006: 79). Indeed, in studying progressive Christians, the focus upon one's past experiences is highlighted by a reflection upon those forms of Christianity that they see as maintaining the beliefs, practices and identity markers, which progressive Christians themselves have left behind.

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189 The use of the term 'deconversion' is best applied in the context of those looking at the 'emerging church' (e.g. Harrold 2006; Bielo 2009b; 2011a) because it is a category employed by those who position themselves within the emerging church movement. The term was not used by any of my informants during my research, although the term is often used on atheist websites and forums by those who refer to themselves as former or deconverted Christians. In many of these forums, progressive Christianity is represented as 'the last step' of deconversion (see for example www.positiveatheism.org; www.de-conversion.com; www.exchristian.net). Additionally, the term is often used in a tongue-and-cheek fashion by atheists who perform deconversion or 'debaptismal' ceremonies in which a hair dryer is used to reverse a former or deconverted Christian's baptism. A quick search for "deconversion ritual" or "debaptism ceremony" on YouTube finds several of these humorous rituals including one by the American Atheists Society in which the participants joke that they have been 'born again, again' or 'unborn again', available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaSKQwbFMuA> (Accessed January 21, 2012).
For example, in my conversation with Stewart, a man in his late sixties who attends West Hill United Church, he remembers his pre-deconversion self as experiencing a sense of emptiness brought on by his inability to make sense of traditional Christian tenets. Growing up in the Baptist Church, Stewart's father had been a fairly prominent local Baptist leader, who in the 1930s lectured against Darwinism and on topics such as biblical numeracy.

Stewart: Well, as I moved from the background I grew up in to where I am now, I realised that for my own . . ., that I had to give up some beliefs because they just weren't connecting with me.

Rebekka: Connecting? How so?

Stewart: Ummm. They just—they were not making any sense. And so I remember after being at West Hill for about a year, really feeling a huge hole in my life. Just because I realised what I was leaving wasn't working for me but I had nothing to fill it—to fill that gap.

Rebekka: Okay. How was it not working? What was—

Stewart: Well, you know, the realisation, you know, I hadn't really thought it out strongly yet: teaching that God is love and he answers prayers but realizing that if he is, who he is, the fact that he can be selective about what he's going to answer and not answer and having a hard time accepting that if he really is that loving, how he could be selective. And how he could punish people who were inadequate as far as he was concerned about meeting his wishes? So that image of God just didn't fit for me [pause]. I guess. So I started reading a bit of Spong and I can remember hearing Jack Good speak about dishonesty in the church. And realised that I've—I propagated that dishonesty myself unintentionally.

Rebekka: Okay, unintentionally.

Stewart: By, you know, telling people what I believed and realising how unrealistic it is to—the image of God that I was believing in. And the image of what God might be or should be—could be just did not fit together, for me at that point.

Rebekka: What was that like when you had that realization that things were not coming together for you?

Stewart: I did a lot of crying. It was a good reason to continue with therapy (pause). I was definitely hoping that I'd find some way of being happy with
myself having decided that belief system was not working. I thought I could be happy in life and find a way of being in the world which would compensate. And I think I probably had that empty feeling for about a year and a half.

Rebekka: You had that feeling for a year?

Stewart: About a year and a half and then I just—kept searching and trying to feel ...

Rebekka: That’s really interesting. Um, so while you were going through this time of feeling empty, you were continuing to attend West Hill?

Stewart: I was being fed by the music, by the community prayers and by Gretta’s messages. I remember one day I was shaking my head and I said to Gretta, "I’m really pissed today." She looked at me with a really worried look on her face, and I said—I can't remember the answer but I said, "all of a sudden—I've heard someone preach on this facet of life probably off-and-on for the last fifty years and you're the first one who has ever made any sense. I'm really mad at the other people."

Rebekka: And, what was her response, do you remember? (laughs).

Stewart: (laughs). She went from being shocked to smiling (laughs).

Rebekka: (laughs).

Stewart: So I’ve gone through that sort of reaction.

Rebekka: So you don't feel empty anymore?

Stewart: No.

This experience of emptiness and focus on the 'pre-conversion' self are evangelical tropes that Stewart makes use of to discuss his deconversion experience. While the discussion that I have included here is drawn from my formal interview with Stewart, it should be noted that Stewart and other progressive Christians often informally shared these types of narratives in reading and discussion groups. For the most part these conversations occurred informally when we broke into smaller groups to discuss a text we were reading or a video clip that we had just watched.
Barbour suggests that the deconversion narrative mimics that of the conversion narrative in that it provides a means of chronologically organizing a distinct shift in worldview, ideological commitments, or way of life (1994: 50). The conversion moment is often represented as an instantaneous and public event (as in an altar call or praying the 'sinner's prayer') although arguably it is usually gradual and represented as instantaneous. Likewise, deconversion is usually something that occurs over a sustained period of time, in private reading, discussion and contemplation. Recognized as such, the deconversion narrative functions in such a way that enables the individual to bring together a series of events that might otherwise be "experienced as unconnected, confusing or inconclusive" (51).

With this in mind, I will now turn to three examples from my fieldwork in which individuals recount the ways in which they have been 'saved' by progressive Christianity. I do so while juxtaposing their current theological stance with what they say they believed prior to their deconversion. In the following three examples, my interlocutors Thomas, Hedy and Sandra explain that their transformation constituted both an emotional and intellectual one. Each contrasts his or her former self with their current self, however the return to and reflection upon the former self helps to create a narrative of continuity while at the same time creating one of disjuncture—the new self is responsible for maintaining elements of the former one.

An important assumption made on the part of these three interlocutors and by Monica and Stewart (discussed above) involves the idea that something about religiosity remains the same. As noted above, the contrast between belief on one hand and praxis, narrative and lifestyle on the other hand promotes a certain narrative of consistency. Stewart's comments to Vosper that he had heard preaching on "this facet of life probably off-and-on for the last fifty
years" furthers this notion of consistency. Despite the fact that Vosper is the first to preach on this "facet of life" in a way that makes sense to Stewart, he implies that it is not the "facet of life" that is different but rather Vosper's approach. Stewart explains that he had experienced a sense of emptiness and was "unable to fill the gap" for many years. While it somewhat unclear what he is looking to fill, it appears that through his journey towards becoming a progressive Christian, the container and its ensuing contents have maintained some sort of uniformity. In many ways, there is a process of emptying and refilling that depends on this container being the same: Christianity, preaching, the "facet of life".

Thomas' Story

It is possible that this is not the first time that I have met Thomas although neither of us remembers or recognizes the other. In 2004, during my Master's degree I wrote a paper on the evangelical church in Kingston, Ontario, which Thomas, then in high school, attended occasionally. For that paper I interviewed the youth pastor who has been a long-time friend of mine; Thomas and I instantly bonded over our shared affection for her. Smiling, I remember how during my tenure there the kids at the church received a reprimand from their youth pastor for sneaking up onto the church roof. I also remember that services at that church were so over-crowded that during the second morning service we had to sit on the floor of the sanctuary unable to find a place in the pews.

190 In our conversation, Stewart does not tell me what the particular "facet of life" is that was the topic of Vosper's sermon.

191 This mini-ethnography looked specifically at the Youth Ministry program at this church. I attended the church for two and half months (from October to the middle of December) and met regularly with the youth pastor. I conducted one formal interview with the youth pastor and several informal ones with members of the youth group, who were over the age of eighteen. If Thomas and I had met, I would have probably avoided speaking with him because I did not have permission from the Research Ethics Board at Queen's University to study any minors at the church.
Four years later, after struggling with doubts, Thomas is now an undergraduate student in the history department at Trent University and no longer considers himself to be an evangelical. He tells me that he grew up nominally Catholic and that he converted to evangelicalism as a teenager. Initially, he found what he identifies as a Protestant-derived understanding of Jesus as a friend—"buddy Jesus"—to be especially appealing. He found that he could hold the Christian perspective at church or in other Christian venues, but that as he became more involved in various Christian youth activities he discovered the following:

It was a lot more kind of intensive in terms of making your faith your own. All these kind of catch phrases and cool ideas of bringing your faith outside of [a Christian environment]. A lot of it wasn't making sense because I had a lot of questions, doubting a lot because it had never meant anything to me beyond church or beyond [other Christian venues]. I was really playing out, 'okay, if?' Just trying to process a lot of things and talking to my leaders about it.

It is important to note here that Thomas locates his doubts as co-existing with his initial conversion; from the very beginning there were elements of the Christian narrative that did not make sense, especially when he attempted to reconcile Christianity with his life at home and at school. Further on in our conversation he reveals that the bible served as one of the core locations in which he simultaneously possessed doubt and certainty: "In 2003 I'd committed to following the words of Christ to the best of my ability. As my God, I guess. From there it's just been a journey of seeing 'what does this actually mean' and 'how do I interpret the bible, does the bible mean anything to me?'"

In explaining the textual ideology he held at this time, Thomas clarifies that while it was one which understood proper biblical interpretation as literal, he was not a

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192 Thomas reports that this approach ultimately led him to progressive Christianity but it should be noted that Thomas' commitment to "following the words of Christ" and attempting to determine his own interpretation of the biblical text is a common one amongst Christians. Indeed, recently many Christians Thomas' age have adopted similar approaches and pursued the 'emerging church'.
fundamentalist. Commenting how he has recently departed from a literalist approach to reading the bible, Thomas explains:

I'm at this stage, kind of coming out of—I don't want to call it fundamentalist, but those past years, from 2003 to 2006, I'd say 2007, were kind of, 'yes the bible's literal,' let's see the meaning out of it, blah, blah, blah. Now the more that I've learned—just in an undergraduate education as a history student—the more I've thought about some of the implications of this literal [interpretation]. And then, this is where Spong comes in, in a big way to me, he was the first person I encountered, through reading his work, that was open with his doubts. And now I know that there is definitely critical biblical scholarship but I was just blind to it. I'd never had that be part of my reality. So it was very refreshing to hear him voicing a lot of the concerns that I was having in my heart. So, no I don't think the bible is literal. The answer to that question, first off. I think that my relationship to it is very complex.

Thomas is quick to point out to me that progressive Christianity is not the only place where one can encounter the ideas associated with biblical criticism. When he is home in Kingston he sometimes attends a church that follows the emerging church model and posits itself as a place for seekers and those with doubts. Thomas is critical, however, in pointing out that they do so without actually referencing the specific thinkers, telling me that "they'll use Borg a bit as a catalyst for their discussion. But they never admit it."

When I ask him how he found George Street United Church, his eyes light up. He explains to me that he had been church shopping for a while in Peterborough and was looking for a place where he could feel comfortable. Having just finished Spong's book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* that past summer, Thomas was shocked to discover that Spong would be lecturing that fall at George Street United Church.

I was amazed and somewhat perplexed why Peterborough would be hosting him. Because I didn't think—why would he give Peterborough the time of day? Like how did he wind up in this small town in Canada? It made me really, really happy. And it also made me think, there has to be something special going on here, some honesty that a lot of other Christian churches in this town won't be allowing their congregants even to think about.
His affection for George Street United Church and for the church’s minister, Karen, is evident. Having never been part of a community that uses gender-inclusive language, Thomas is especially fond of the way that Karen refers to God as "father-mother" while reading biblical passages.

In many ways, Thomas is a prime example of someone who feels like progressive Christianity provided him with a means of maintaining his Christianity. Although he had been involved in an emerging church, he found it difficult to reconcile the Christian narrative with his everyday experiences until he was introduced to the writings of John Spong by a friend at university. Thomas is the only twenty-something whom I have interviewed and one of only a handful I have encountered during my fieldwork. Although he did not attend the reading group at George Street United Church, he made a point of coming over the find me at Spong's two-day lecture series at the church. When we met Thomas described himself as a "confused" Christian for whom progressive theology raises many difficult questions but he nevertheless finds progressive theology to be "refreshing," a point which he emphasised again during my interview with him. In discussing the effects of progressive texts on his own journey he explained:

Well, I have definitely, I guess progressed much more toward the progressive or liberal movement. And I've started to kind of internalize some of their messages. And I'm at the point where I ask 'what have I lost, or will I lose, if I continue on this way from my traditional background?' So I don't know; I'm kind of torn. I'd say this is an interesting time for me because in one way I really want to stay on this Spong-path, or whatever you want to call it, because, like I said, the honesty that I don't find in other institutions is what draws me to it mainly. The ideas are very refreshing but when it comes down to the fact that they are willing to be honest about it is what's important.

Despite indicating that he had a lot of respect for evangelical Christians and sometimes found Spong to be overly focused on rationalism, Thomas articulated that Spong and progressive
Christianity provided him with a place to dismiss or at least not worry about certain doctrines or beliefs:

One thing that he [Spong] once said was that he was tired of jumping through theological hoops or dealing with becoming a theological pretzel to come to all these places of understanding God, which I appreciate, it was one thing that I was like, "yeah, you're right! I don't want to keep trying to figure out how does the Trinity work? How all these different things work?"

For Thomas, reading popular theological texts and attending Spong's lectures allow him to internalize progressive theological stances and to justify his departure from evangelical and emerging forms of Christianity. Thomas is acutely aware that he is involved in a process of transition.

Like Thomas, many of the progressive Christians whom I interviewed indicated that through authors such as Spong, and their own involvement in a reading group, they experienced a "revelation" of sorts. Exposure to biblical criticism and fellowship with other Christians who held the same worldview and possessed the same doubts was experienced as a transformative moment that is not unlike the experience of the evangelical Christian who recounts having been 'born again' (see Stromberg 1993 for a linguistic analysis of conversion narratives). For Thomas, the process of deconversion is interpreted as an intellectual procedure involving beliefs and a moment of cognitive crisis. For others, however, the intellectual aspects of progressive Christianity—even in the popularized form of writings by individuals like Spong—was daunting; their transformation was focused instead on moral or ethical considerations.
**Hedy's Story**

On her almost daily walks to and from West Hill United Church, Hedy hums the melodies of the old church hymns with which she no longer theologically agrees. Songs like 'Onward Christian Soldiers' have been banned from most liberal and progressive Christian communities because of their imperial and military-style theology, but for Hedy the beat helps her pass the time as she walks the ten minute walk between her tiny apartment and the church.

"You don't get to be ninety without hitting a few bumps in the road," Hedy points out to me over a cup of tea as we meet in the dark lounge of West Hill United Church. It is a wet and cold day in May, and when I pull up in the empty church parking lot, I see her slender body bent over the garden pulling at weeds and preparing the flowerbeds for planting in a few weeks time. As I get out of the car, Hedy slowly straightens up, turns to face me and smiles. Her face is always expressive and her form and stance is that of an on-duty soldier, perhaps an involuntary acknowledgement of the three years she had spent in the air force during the Second World War.

The church has always played a central role in Hedy's life, and she has always insisted on doing church her own way. In the recounting of her life story, independence emerges as the predominant theme. It is an independence that has been proudly earned but has arrived as the by-product of always playing the role of the outsider. For much of her adult life, Hedy has felt in part like an outsider, a fact which perhaps partially explains her attraction to a community that likewise sees itself as an outsider in relation to the mainstream church—theologically, socio-economically and politically.
Born into a Methodist family, her grandfather had been a proponent of church union, and as a minister he successfully led his small town Eastern Ontario church into church union when Hedy was all but five years old. Following the family line, her father had been a Sunday school teacher and taught young Hedy that Christianity was something that was practiced, not preached. Growing up during the Great Depression, church was a way of life and Hedy's childhood was a happy one:

My life was—part of my life was pretty well centred around the church. Most of my friends went to church, not necessarily the same one but it was a way of life in a small village and rural community. We all had similar backgrounds of stability—even during the Depression when things were tough. Even the people that had money didn't flaunt it. We all lived in somebody's hand-down clothing and made-do with what we had. We were fortunate that we lived in a situation where despite of the fact that farming had hit a tough spot in the mid-thirties when there was a drought in our county, we all still had enough to eat and we lived pretty well. I think we lived exceptionally well because our farm was beside a small lake: we swam, we skated, we had boats. When I look back now I think we really were privileged that we had all of the advantages that we had. My dad had spent his teenage years in Montreal and chose to be a farmer. He had some College education, I don't know whether (laughs). Anyway, he was a very clever man, a pretty firm disciplinarian but I guess he spoiled me because, now that I think of it, I had two older brothers. Though I wore their old skates—when it became time for me to skate, I was the one who got new skates, I got new skis, I got a new bicycle. When I think of it now, I was the spoiled brat.

After high school Hedy attended the MacDonald Institute in Guelph, Ontario, an instructional institution for women in the arts and sciences of home economics. Ever the tomboy, Hedy would dream of attending the nearby Agricultural Institute, preferring the outdoors and working the fields with her brothers to cooking and home-making skills. At night she and her friends would sneak out the windows of the residence.

"Those were interesting years," she tells me with a wide smile and a twinkle in her eye, choosing not to disclose what happened but only that "lots of people knew about those windows." In those days of sneaking out windows and pursuing revelry on Saturday nights,
Hedy and her roommate attended an Anglican Church on Sunday mornings. Not used to the liturgical format of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Hedy found the rote nature of the liturgy puzzling: "by the time you've done it a few times you don't need the prayer book. You just say it, it's repetition, you don't think about it. You're probably half asleep from being out the night before." In 1990, after having not been in an Anglican Church for almost fifty years Hedy attended an Air Force Reunion in St. John's, Newfoundland and was shocked to discover that in the ensuing half century very little had changed: "I sat down in the pew and opened it up right in the right page in the prayer book. I hadn't forgotten it in all those years," she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

After the War, Hedy and her husband, James, moved to live with her parents in rural Ontario to work on their farm. Because she loved the farm work, Hedy took over much of that while James, a mechanic, ran the mechanical side of things. James was the son of an extremely devout Pentecostal mother and though the church had been of great comfort to their mother, James and his seven siblings had elected to leave the church as early as possible. Hedy speaks hesitantly and very little about her husband, and I do not push her for details. When she does discuss her marriage it is in reference to her daughter, Anne, with whom Hedy is very close. While living with her parents, Hedy drove her mother to various church functions and, because she felt out of place in the social worlds of women her own age, preferred to participate in the book study group with her mother and her mother's friends in the Women's Missionary Society.

Hedy and James moved to Scarborough in 1961 in a time which she describes as "the height of the atomic bomb scare." Their daughter Anne was nine years old. At first, despite its homogenous, "waspy" environment, Hedy felt out of place in the more urban
environment, "I found that it's a real cultural shock to go from a small town where I knew everybody and was involved in everything, to come to a city and be nothing! But my daughter and I found a church and it wasn't too long before we were back being involved in everything."

The world that Hedy describes is that of the supposed suburban North American dream. She describes the years of Anne's childhood as a time when they "coasted along," participating in the typical activities of Canadian girlhood: Brownies, Sunday school, and Explorers. She remembers hearing her daughter swear allegiance to the Queen, the Country and God in Brownies. As the years went by Hedy became increasingly anxious about the religious viewpoints presented in the circles in which she moved. "I read a fair amount and began to be a little uncomfortable with some of the things that I was hearing. I know that things like saying the Lord's Prayer got to be so much of a rote that I could figure out what I was going to have for lunch while I was saying the Lord's Prayer and it sort of got to be meaningless."

West Hill United Church's flamboyant and charismatic minister, Fred Styles, was reason enough for Hedy to switch from a nearby United Church congregation in 1979. "I remember so well the first time I saw him come down the aisle. He wore a white robe and I think up to that time I had never seen a United Church minister in anything but a black one. Here comes Fred up the aisle." As always, Hedy quickly became involved in the day-to-day activities of the church, and she has been involved in the book study group at West Hill United Church since practically its beginning. Hedy missed the very first study in 1981 that was geared specifically to couples, because she knew that she would not have been able to convince her husband to accompany her. When she did go the following year, Hedy found
the intellectual tenure of the group's discussions about their study book, Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled*, to be both inspirational and intellectually intimidating. Participating in the group made her feel uncertain, and as she had done throughout her life, Hedy attempted to maintain and solidify her outsider status. Ultimately, however, the group's accepting and inclusive spirit won her over.

I remember participating in that group and breaking down and not feeling that I would be excommunicated because I couldn't handle what was going on. I cannot remember what it was. But the comfort, the hands that came out to hold my hand. I can get emotional about it now; it meant so much to me.

As she remembers she starts to cry softly. Speaking with increased sincerity she recounts the following:

It meant so much being accepted. My husband was a mechanic. All these other people, they were university graduates but they never excluded me. They included me in their lives, their groups, their homes. I got great comfort out of that because I always felt sort of like I didn't belong. I would think to myself, I'm just sort of on the fringe, they're accepting me because I'm willing to get in and participate and so on but socially I'm an outsider. But I never felt that way here; I felt total acceptance from the time I walked in the door, even though I wanted to be the outsider.

In light of this initial desire to 'be an outsider', in the ensuing thirty years Hedy has come to assume quite the opposite social position within the community of West Hill United Church. She participates in all aspects of the church's life and is a regular lay leader of the church services. As Hedy speaks, I think to myself about the first time we met and how eager the church's minister, Gretta Vosper, had been to introduce us.

"You'll have to meet Hedy," Gretta exclaimed to me, the first Sunday I visited West Hill United Church for a service, just after my application to study the group had been approved by the church's board. "She'll be a great resource for you," Gretta continued as she

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marched me up to the simply dressed, smiling woman who now—several months later—sits across from me sharing her life story and her insecurities. I ask her about her theological beliefs and whether or not she believes in God.

"God is love," she responds simply, clarifying that she experiences love at West Hill week to week and that is all she needs to sustain herself spiritually, a community to travel "the road less travelled with" she explains, a reference to the book featured in the very first book study she attended.

It would be fair to say that Hedy's theological thinking is representative of many within the United Church of Canada. Her experience with study groups began as a young woman when she joined the United Church Women's Missionary Society, which among other activities selected a missionary text as a study book each year. At West Hill she has been engaged in their studies, which have included both theological or religious texts by popular authors like John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman; spiritually-based self-help texts by M. Scott Peck and Deepak Chopra; and even non-religious books by John Ralston Saul and Barbara Kingsolver. The members of the community have reported that in each instance they have found the texts to challenge their preconceived assumptions. For Hedy the experience of intellectual uncertainty is resolved by social interactions with the community. The sense of the community travelling together is


196 As they have explained, the majority of the books have been 'religious' or 'spiritual' in nature (these are my interlocutors categories, not mine). Ralston Saul's work looks at interactions between the earlier colonialists in Canada and the indigenous peoples. His text, interestingly, was approached much in the same way as many of the religious and theological texts the group read—primarily as a venue in which employ historical criticism to explore the 'true' origins of a founding narrative (albeit in the place of the biblical narrative, Ralston Saul is interrogating the founding myth of Canada).
important at West Hill United Church, just as it has been at the other communities I studied. The focus on the community has meant a focus on what the community does when it gathers together, specifically how it conducts church services.

For example, as in the community at West Hill and the other progressive churches in this study, Hedy found that upon further reflection she no longer felt able to say the words of the Lord’s Prayer and sing hymns which appear to contain a theology of atonement. Because of this, the church has decided to ban certain hymns and prayers, along with rewriting others so that they do not contain references to those elements of the Christian tradition they seek to jettison. When asked about her response to several members of the community who have left over the changing of the words, her tone was once again quite emotional:

> What has broken my heart is that a lot of the people that I did love and still do are not here now <starts to cry>. I don't know. I'm very awkward when I meet them. I can't accept the fact that they can't accept the fact that <pause, to regain composure> that some of those old hymns that they sing and so on that I can't sing them now and some of those creeds that they recite, I can't recite them now <sigh>.

I will return to this question of language and words which can and cannot be spoken below and in Chapter Five. What is important for this chapter is the suggestion that Hedy has been transformed—at one point she could say the creeds and sing the hymns but there is a new version of her that can no longer engage traditional creeds and songs.

Additionally important here is the notion that for Hedy the process she has undertaken is a social or a collective one. The image of hands that reached out to hold her hand during a time of cognitive, emotional and class crisis is in contrast to that of the people that left over a difference of theological opinion. For Hedy, it is more than just a loss of friends at church that upsets her, but rather the loss of companions telling a mutual narrative together. In Chapter Two, I refer to Spong's use of the image of Israelites crossing the Red
Sea as an analogy for how progressive Christians understand the evolution of their theology as a social and collective experience. While Spong explained that they are all "more or less moving in the same direction" his role and the role of other pastoral figures is to make sure that everyone stays on the same path. It is important in this analogy that they stay together as a group—those who move too quickly are instructed to slow down and wait for the group and those who move too slowly run the risk of falling into the sea as the waters advance. 

While deconversion narratives are personal in their recitation it is important to understand that they come out of the spontaneous stories formed through relationships and in collective environments. In Chapter Two, I relate Paul's confession to me that he considers himself to be a "closet progressive Christian." Paul has not chosen to attend a progressive Christian church and has not revealed his theological leanings to his wife. He has many reasons for doing so. He enjoys his current church, he worries about his wife's reaction to progressive Christianity and he feels called to work to broaden the theological perspective of his current church. The fact that Paul feels that he is unable to discuss progressive Christianity with his wife, whom he calls a "traditional believer," suggests that the move towards progressive Christianity is not as individualist as many of the accounts of deconversion narratives suggest. Theology is triggered by one's relationships. In my next example, I look at the close friendship between Margie and Sandra and how theirs is a story of mutual deconversion.

**Sandra and Margie's Stories**

"Rebekka will have some wine," Sandra exclaimed as I walked into the kitchen answering the group's speculation as to whether or not it was appropriate to open a bottle or
two of wine at lunch time. Before I had a chance to respond the bottles were opened and our hostess Margie began to distribute it between several glasses. Sandra nodded in approval and continued busying herself, arranging crackers on a plate filled with cheddar, gouda and brie.

Sandra is one of my favourite members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church because she reminds me of my mother: she is decisive, enjoys the occasional mid-afternoon glass of wine and will often stop to reflect on the beauty of a moment—for instance, the way the light falls on furniture in her sitting room when she watches it from her rocking chair in the kitchen.

Today in the kitchen, Sandra and Margie shared the easy friendship that women form later in life, after their children have left home and—as was the case for both women—their marriages had ended. Nodding appreciatively as I was handed a glass of wine, I looked at the smiling faces of children on the refrigerator door.

"Are these your grandchildren?" I asked, already knowing that they were Margie's pride and joy. As I expected, her face lit up and she hurried across the kitchen to explain who was who in the smiling pictures and the circumstances around each photograph. Smiling at the children, Sandra handed me a plate of pickles and asked me to help her make room on the already overflowing dining room table. A spread of breads, cheeses, salads and cold-cuts were laid out in preparation for the Agape Meal—one of three that was taking place simultaneously at the homes of different members of the parish to discuss the future plans and desires of the church.

As the granddaughter of a Baptist minister, Margie had grown up attending a United Church in small town Ontario. Her childhood was a world of Sunday school socials and quilting bees. Recalling her experience, she contrasts it with her former husband's childhood experiences of church:
I never missed a day of Sunday school through all my childhood, I loved it. I loved being involved. When I got married, my husband had had terrible experiences as a kid. He was raised in an Anglican Church and had to go two or three times a Sunday when he wanted to be outside playing. So when we got married he said, "I don’t have any intention of ever setting foot in a church other than for weddings or funerals." So, I just didn’t go at all. When we had our family, I said, "I loved Sunday school and I really want the boys to have that experience." So I started taking them on my own. It wasn’t the same because of that tension.

In addition to the tension at home, Margie found it difficult to find a church in which she felt comfortable. She attended a number of churches and found that in each instance the congregations were caught up in social battles which she found to be "unchristian." Recalling that experience, Margie explained, "there started a battle in the church over the minister. One faction against the other and everybody coming and saying, 'what do you think? Don’t you think he’s terrible.'" Eventually Margie stopped attending church altogether.

Sandra and Margie had been friends for years. They had worked together at a primary school where Sandra was the principal and Margie a teacher. One day in the staff room each had reflected on growing up in a faith community, how important that had been to them and how they had missed the fellowship since they had both stopped attending. Together they resolved to find a church that appealed to them and attended half a dozen churches in their quest to find one they liked. Finally, Margie saw an ad in the local paper featuring Holy Cross Lutheran Church's first speaker-session featuring Tom Harpur. "We had both read a lot of his work," Margie explained to me. "So we went to that and Pastor Dawn had put the church's mission statement up on the screen and they had put the brochures on the chairs, we kind of read it and looked at each other and said, 'well, this kind of sounds interesting.' But, we didn't trust that. We went back to the second speaker and the third speaker and said, 'You
know we should go and check that church out.' But it took us probably six months before we did. But I've been every Sunday since that first time, other than when I'm away."

Having grown up in the Free Methodist Church in the United States, when she moved to Canada Sandra began to attend a Baptist Church. She experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the negativity of her former pastor: "everything was bad for him—the whole world was going to hell. I'm not opposed to that kind of thinking, it has its place. But that can't be everything. I couldn't go to church and think like that." Finding Holy Cross Lutheran Church was a turning point for her, but she struggled more than Margie in terms of finding a place in the community.

The first few months I attended the church, I spoke to no one. If anyone had offered me a kind word or encouragement I would have broken down into hysterics. I never took part in any of the rituals—I just listened to the sermons. It was like I was being reprogrammed. I had to listen carefully. Soon I began to see that everything I had been taught was wrong. It was a whole new world and I was a new person.

This notion of being 'reprogrammed' or transformed seems especially suited to an individual who has grown up in the contemporary North American church. Margie and Sandra's language surrounding transformation is not uncommon, especially among Protestants and evangelicals. Likewise, Sandra's insistence that she needs to 'listen carefully' reflects common Protestant concerns that her religiosity is rooted in her comprehension of her own beliefs—not only does Sandra expect that she must believe doctrines and teachings but she must also understand them. For Sandra the new knowledge that her former beliefs had been 'wrong' introduces an entirely new world, and indeed she becomes a 'new person'. This transformation resembles motifs popular in evangelical Protestantism, which draws its
theology from certain teachings of Paul; for example Romans 6:1-11 and Galatians 3:28, which are suggestive of a new self adopted through faith in Jesus.\textsuperscript{197}

Even though she was in a process of rejecting traditional Christian knowledge forms, Sandra's representation of her experience follows a familiar pattern—through conversion one likewise becomes a new person. Following from this example and the previous one, I suggest that the cognitive location familiar to Protestant evangelicalism in certain ways determines the framework in which progressive Christians represent themselves. Once again, since conversion—the process of being 'born again' through the affirmation of a new set of beliefs—stands as the means by which their Protestant proximate other constructs its own worldview against that of secular society, progressive Christians form their own worldview against their Protestant proximate other by adopting similar cognitively-positioned frameworks.\textsuperscript{198}

Deconstructing Deconversion: (Born Again, Again)\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{197} Judith Lieu (2002) explains that in early Christian literature Christian identity is linked to a notion of agency in which "a new way of understanding is created and maintained" (213). This performative spoken declaration is so powerful, according to Lieu, that for some well-known martyrs (e.g. Perpetua, Tertulian and Polycarp) the statement "I am a Christian" is represented as a self-conception in which 'Christian' surpasses and subverts ethnic, national, civic or familial identities (in the case of Perpetua, for example, her father is so distraught at this new identity that he comes close to physically assaulting her and gouging out her eyes).

\textsuperscript{198} Like Monica and Thomas, Sandra has direct experiences with the Protestant proximate other that are not shared by the majority of those within the churches that I have studied. Below, I discuss the authoritative roles available to those who have direct experience with and intimate knowledge of the Protestant proximate other.

\textsuperscript{199} I would like to thank Elizabeth Pritchard for inquiring into the distinction between deconversion and change of religious affiliation. In her response to a paper I presented at the 2009 American Academy of Religion conference, Pritchard offered 'born again, again' as a consideration. Prichard's terminology is appealing because it lends itself to the interpretation by Harrold (2006, discussed in this section), on which I expand with contributions by Stromberg (1993) to suggest that the deconversion as a rhetoric is situated in a future-oriented present that presents itself as moving forward but is held in tension by an ambiguous and potentially unrealizable future (see further discussions in chapter 5). Ultimately however, the term 'born again, again' does not accurately point to the fact that there is an acute sense of loss being experienced and related in the deconversion narrative. Instead the term is much more accurately applied to its use on the part of committed Christians who participate in a conversion ritual. For example, in her article " Born Again . . . and Again and
In order to account for this process of creating the new self through the accumulation of new knowledge, I rely upon a theoretical analysis that employs a Mannheimian sociology of knowledge to explain that the means through which knowledge is adopted and the nature of the relationship between groups is rooted is in the area of competition. More succinctly stated, the types of knowledge generated by a certain group are directly dependent upon and related to the types of knowledge generated by those groups that they see themselves to be in competition with—in this case, progressives and evangelicals. Mannheim (1936: 269) holds as a core assumption that society is divided into social groups that produce particular social locations for the individual actor; these groups also relate to particular, common forms of knowledge. One of the central premises of his work is that the struggle for social dominance between two competing social groups or forces occurs within the realms of perspective, knowledge, and language. Extending this theory into the realm of religion, I suggest that the cognitive location and its ensuing worldview, as well as the linguistic models of the Protestant proximate other, dictate the framework in which progressive Christians pattern their own language and worldviews.

As has been explained, progressive Christians very clearly establish themselves, following a Mannheimian model, in opposition to and competition with what they perceive to be the evangelical Christian Right—or that which I call the Protestant proximate other—and construct their own version of Christianity as antagonistic to it. In doing so, they follow a pattern that has been set out by their Protestant proximate other in their own attempts to assert their identity against secular society. The deconversion narrative mimics that of the conversion narrative in that it provides a means of chronologically organizing and

Again” (1981), anthropologist Diane J. Austin-Broos points to the practice on the part of Pentecostals in Jamaica who, despite already having been 'saved' participate in altar calls as a way of reifying the experience of communitas and strengthening the spiritual powers of their congregation (see Austin 1981: 240-41).
performing a distinct shift in worldview, ideological commitments, or a way of life. Though the conversion experience is often highly emotional for the adherent (see Smilde 2007), deconversion appeals to rationality in order to be enacted. This practice of private reading, intimate conversions and contemplation is designed to be the exact opposite of the enthusiasm that is associated with an altar call and other born again experiences. Although, as is clear in the examples I have provided, feelings of emptiness and private tears also accompany progressive Christian deconversion experiences. Given this point, one might expect deconversion narratives to follow different patterns and indeed be performed and interpreted differently by both the adherent and her audience in a progressive Christian setting. It is significant, however, that much like a conversion narrative, the deconversion narrative draws its power from the former version of Christianity that directs the degree of authority instilled in the new one.

To return to the example from the beginning of this chapter, Monica's authority stems from her self-identification as a "recovering Christian" and an atheist. I mentioned previously that atheists within the progressive Christian movement—or what we might term, 'strong' atheists—make up one contingent alongside the more common 'non-theists' and agnostics. What is most interesting is that my fieldwork has revealed that those within this community who are most likely to adopt an atheistic stance are those who consider themselves to be former, recovering evangelicals or fundamentalists. Also interesting is that these individuals appear to hold the most symbolic social capital within the group and assume positions of authority within the church as mentors and leaders. For example, in his autobiography, John Spong writes about growing up in the American south during the 1930s. At church and in

\[200\] Strong atheism, also known as positive or explicit atheism, refers to an atheist who has made a conscious decision to reject theism.
other social spheres, he encountered segregation, homophobia and fundamentalism. His biography, *Here I Stand* (2000) and many of his other writings reflect upon his departure from fundamentalism. To offer another example, Monica was asked to lead the workshop on 'losing my religion' at the 2009 conference of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.

Likewise, the keynote speaker for that event was Scott Campbell, a former self-professed fundamentalist and Baptist pastor who became an atheist in the 1990s. In his presentation, Campbell, who is now a keynote speaker for corporate and NGO conferences, used himself as an object of study, analyzing his childhood, his divinity training at Tyndale Seminary and his brief conversion to charismatic Christianity in the early 1990s as a means of exploring and explicating his eventual deconversion to atheism. In many ways, Campbell represented himself as an insider-expert on conservative, fundamentalist and charismatic Christianity, a position which lent authority to both his atheism and his journey to it.201 Both Campbell and Monica were extremely well received; in informal conversations at the conference, a number of conference participants singled out Campbell's keynote address—as well as the workshop featuring Canadian secularist, Justin Trottier who was at the time the executive director of the Centre for Inquiry—as one of the highlights of the conference.

Bourdieu explains that the "authority of discourse" does not depend upon the content or style of presentation "but rather in the social conditions of production and reproduction of the distribution between the classes of the knowledge and the recognition of legitimate language" (1991: 113). This means that for Monica and other progressive Christians, the

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201Note, as a popular keynote speaker, Campbell is a public figure and as such I have not elected to change his name. He maintains a blog, 'The Former Fundie' which promotes naturalism and critical thinking and is incredibly open about his former and current stance regarding religious beliefs and practices. It is available online at: <http://theformerfundie.wordpress.com/>. Campbell has also been a guest preacher at West Hill United Church, advocating scientific and naturalist explanations for creation.
authority of the discourse stems from its similarity to, and tension with, the evangelical testimony narrative. This deconversion narrative, it can be argued, contributes to the institutional aspects of 'performative' language (see Bourdieu 1991 following Austin 1962). A conscious rejection of the content is balanced by a subconscious assumption of the same linguistic mode of communication.

Harrold points out, in his discussion of deconversion in the emerging church, that an ambiguity often emerges with an inability to reconcile the past (the origins) with a new vision of the future. While the deconversion narrative itself denotes a "clear point of departure" (2006: 81) the representation of where the deconvert has landed is ambiguous.\(^{202}\) The question of from what religious modality one has opted to turn animates deconversion narratives—as in the examples of Monica, Stewart, Thomas, Hedy and Sandra—as does the ambiguity of where they are ultimately headed and what ideological distances they have really travelled. In each of the cases above and the evidence I collected over my two and half years of fieldwork, the past—those of the individual, the community and Christianity—stands as a central focus of discourse. This focus is true of both the personal narratives told to...

\(^{202}\) The emerging church offers an interesting point of comparison here. Critiques on the part of adherents of this movement often focus upon the beliefs and practices of the evangelical church. As Harrold explains, the desire for "a more authentic ontology are expressed in reaction to an ecclesial context deemed inauthentic" because of its engagement with and accommodation to consumer culture and the complacency of a middle-class lifestyle (2006: 82). In terms of deconversion, the emerging church appears to be deconverting from the organization structures, worship styles and modernist worldviews of the evangelical church in favour of what they would deem to be a postmodernist, organic approach to Christianity practices and lifestyles. For example, Shane Claibourne (well-known for his book *Jesus for President*, and the subsequent tour and documentary film of the same name) criticises the evangelical church not for its doctrines of biblical literacy but its refusal to take what he sees as Jesus' biblical message of radical love literally. This example suggests that the criticism directed towards origins is also aimed towards the recent past, that is, the previous generation of evangelicals.

For progressive Christians a focus on origins has entailed a focus on biblical criticism. They are less likely to critique past generations of mainline Protestantism, although they often reference personal anger towards specific authoritative figures in their own lives: ministers, Sunday School teachers and parental figures. Rather their criticism is against the early and medieval church, along with critiques directed towards the contemporary Christian Right.
me by individuals as well as their discussions about the history of Christianity, especially in terms of Christian origins, as I outlined in the previous chapter.

Harrold explains that when deconversion serves as the primary or prevailing disposition and influences the ways in which the former religiosity is presented, as in the case of progressive Christians, it likewise plays a role in the ways that 1) values are voiced, 2) the 'other' is conceived and 3) the future is envisioned (2006: 80). I have thus far shown that progressive Christian understandings and representations of values, specifically the ethics of believing, as well as representations of the 'other', are an important component deriving from and contributing to a deconversion narrative. It is necessary therefore to explore Harrold's final point concerning the ways the future is devised.

With this in mind, I argue that undergoing the deconversion experience, which progressive Christians perceive to be a radical transformation, creates the possibility that an equally radical one might wait on the horizon. This possibility is created and suggested by the label 'progressive', which indicates a continual motion forward in the same direction. But to what end is still unclear. In the previous chapter, I argued that progressive Christians are haunted by the bible, which is inevitably present in its absence within their communities and conversations. Likewise, I suggest that in certain ways the "progressive" future is enveloped and likewise haunted by the experiences of the past. In the next chapter I argue that progressive Christians are held in tension between the past and future, a state of suspension which is revealed by their use of specific linguistic tropes, especially their use of what I term eschatological adverbs (e.g. 'still', 'already' and 'yet'), which imply a realized future that is ultimately unrealized. Before I discuss the way in which these types of terms function for the
larger community, however, I would like to return to Thomas, Hedy and Sandra and explore the ways that they envision the future.

**Back to the Future: The Role of Rupture in Envisioning the Future**

**Thomas**

Throughout my interview with Thomas he asks my opinion on matters of theology and group dynamics. Thomas is the only person I interviewed who was younger than me—though only by three or four years. When I ask him about the future of Christianity he is critical of the progressive movement: "They're locked in a framework" he explains, "just like fundamentalists." Speaking quickly he continues, "I would hope—this is not what I actually see happening—but I would love if all denominations or all sects—progressive, traditional, conservative, it doesn't matter—were just willing to enter into a dialogue with one another. But I don't actually foresee that happening." Instead Thomas foresees a growing division between what he calls the different factions of the church. He continues with the following explanation:

Like I said earlier in the interview, I think we're still at a point where if you sat down one-on-one with a lot of people and actually asked them [about the types of topics explored by progressive Christians]. A lot of the questions that the progressive movement is trying to react to are still in the hearts of these people that are more traditional, but I think as time goes on and the conversation isn't had between the two factions, you're going to lose those bridges.

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203 At St. Matthias Anglican Church, I was introduced to the teenage daughter of one of my interlocutors. In making introductions, her mother enthusiastically and proudly declared, "I'd like you to meet my daughter, our household's atheist." St. Matthias was the only church I studied that had a youth group. This group, albeit a small group, was actively involved in church life, and while I was conducting fieldwork in that community from January to July 2010 the youth were especially focused on fundraising efforts for relief in Haiti after the massive earthquake that occurred on January 12, 2010.
For Thomas, schism and rupture lie in wait for the future of the church. And while he is critical of progressive Christianity he feels as though he has been betrayed by the evangelical and emerging church.

Yeah, because I wonder if people within the emerging church, myself for a few years included, were almost tricked, you know? I mean, I think that people have all these questions and you're going to a church and it's really laid back and everything seems—you don't feel the tradition there at all. But you look at it a little more closely and what your heart has problems with isn't any different from the church where they're all wearing shirts and ties. I mean the evangelical church not the progressive one. It just kind of seems like the setting in which the emerging church does their worship service is kind of like a mask to the fact that nothing has actually changed. We're just making it appear like that for reasons I don't know why. I guess the final thing that I would add is that I'm really disheartened and pretty sad that it only seems to be in the progressive church where, well, progressive things are happening. So like working with aboriginal communities, working to bridge the gap between the homosexual community, queer community and the church, regardless of the morality of it. I'm not even concerned about that right now. Social justice. I just wish that people that claim to follow Christ literally would actually have reflections of it more in their structures.

His final statements here reflect what Harrold and other scholars of deconversion point to in the fundamental nature of the deconversion narratives. Thomas' story of departure is one that is equally marked by loss, longing and ultimately acceptance. The story of his journey to progressive Christianity is not the story of joyful discovery, but it is one marked by the categories of deconversion—intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering and disaffiliation from a community—and ensuing struggles and internal conflict about his transition, the future of the community, and his place within it.

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204 At the progressive Christian churches featured in this study no one wore suits and ties or what might be traditionally be considered "Sunday best." The dress code was casual but well put together.
Hedy

Asking a twenty-year-old about the future of Christianity and asking the same question to a ninety-year-old is in many ways asking two completely different questions. Whereas Thomas looked me in the eye and followed up many of mine with questions of his own, Hedy at times looks almost past me as if the questions I ask are questions she herself is posing and delivering to an invisible audience. When I ask her what she sees in the future for Christianity, she, like Thomas, begins by referring to fundamentalists. "Oh boy!" she begins, "if I defined Christianity by what's going on in our fundamentalist Christians, I see a very destructive future." She sighs, and continues, "I just hope and 'pray'"—she pauses to draw air quotes with her hands around the term 'pray,' indicating that this not a religious use of the term—"that we don't lose it all in the long run." Like Thomas, Hedy perceives an uncertain future for Christianity. Elaborating on the topic of fundamentalists she outlines why she thinks that they are a problem:

They don't accept non-believers, they don't accept other religious faiths, they don't accept any but their own. I guess this is true of all fundamentalists. I don't know. I just hope that there are enough people who can stick it out, but sometimes we seemed to be overwhelmed by the 'my way or no way' people who seem to dominate.

Shifting the topic from Christianity in general to West Hill United Church specifically, "I know what I want," she begins, "I want West Hill to go on and on and on."

After a lengthy pause, Hedy reflects on a conversation she had recently with another member of the community, Kevin. In doing so she differentiates between the church as a building and the community that frequents it, explaining that she hopes that the community will at least continue to exist.

You know, I think it was just last year that, Kevin said, "you know in twenty years there won't be any United Church." And probably West Hill will be one
of the first, as a building, maybe one of the first ones to drop off. But as a community? I hope it can survive. But you know, the buildings are [pause] a burden. The original churches where people just got together and [pause] I don't know, I don't know. I just hope that West Hill hangs in as long as I do. I don't want to think about my life without this community. If I have to go and meet with this community in a [pause] I don't care, I just don't want to lose this community. I want this community to survive whether it's in this building or in some other place. What I feel for the people here? I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose it.

Hedy and other members of the community foresee a future without the United Church of Canada. Furthermore, what is most interesting is Hedy's concern that the community itself will not survive with or without a building. She employs a series of repetitions to emphasize how adamant she is on this topic: "I want to see West Hill go on and on and on"; "I don't know, I don't know"; "I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose it." The fact that she speaks so strongly on this topic, coupled with her emotional reaction to the fact that several members recently left West Hill United Church over theological differences suggests that Hedy is uncertain about the future of her community. For Hedy, West Hill United Church has served for many years as a substitute for her family and the central hub of her social network. It is a community in which she has found a place to ultimately overcome her notion of herself as an outsider, in part, because at West Hill United Church they are all outsiders, heretics and skeptics.

**Sandra and Margie**

Like Hedy, Margie discusses fundamentalism as a problem. She points out that for her grandchildren who live in Houston, Texas, Christianity is part of the fabric of their social worlds. In contrast, her grandchildren in Canada are less familiar with Christianity because her son, their father, is an agnostic. From time to time, Margie will take them to the Sunday
School at Holy Cross and they appear to enjoy themselves. Commenting on her son's reaction to his children's visits to the Sunday school, Margie notes that,

> He has agreed to let his kids come to Sunday school because he thinks it’s important for them to make some choices themselves. But he’s really listening to the kinds of things they say. They went to a summer camp at a fundamentalist church last summer with some friends and it was awful. I said to Pastor Dawn, we need to have one ourselves. There aren’t enough kids, that’s the problem but I really don’t want them to go back and hear that. The first thing they were told in the morning was “you are all sinners.”

Margie's discussion continues reflecting not just on fundamentalist varieties of Christianity but progressive Christianity as well. Building on the importance of language Margie turns the conversation about the future of Christianity to a discussion of Gretta Vosper's presentation at the church. "I felt like she was struggling to make sure that she didn’t ever say the word God," Margie explains and while her tone is somewhat critical she was interested enough in Vosper's presentation to visit West Hill a few weeks later along with Sandra and a couple from Holy Cross Lutheran Church.

As I ask Margie about her impressions of West Hill she is measured in her response. She points out that she wished that she had been able to be at West Hill for a communion service because she wants to know how the community deals with the Eucharistic images of Jesus' blood and body.\(^{205}\) The image of blood especially is a sticking point for both Margie and Sandra and one that they both raised with me on more than one occasion. Their hope had been to find at West Hill a liturgical approach to the communion service that would allow them to resolve their discomfort with the ritual which is celebrated weekly at Holy Cross. I ask her what her impression was of the service at West Hill and Margie explains that she

\(^{205}\) At this point, I had not yet had the chance to attend a communion service at West Hill, so I was unable to answer her question. On World Communion Sunday in 2010 I did attend one of these services at West Hill; it is described in Chapter Two of this dissertation. The focus is on the image of food and fellowship. The service that I witnessed was one of the rare times that Jesus was mentioned. Vosper told the children that a man named Jesus taught us long ago the importance of sharing meals together (see Appendix C).
found it perplexing and lacking in liturgy. "I didn’t dislike it," she explains noting that it was her first time at a service there so it was hard to form a real impression. "but I thought that it appeared to be hard work [for Vosper] to stay away from [the word] God. I don’t quite understand why she needs to not use that word." Moving on she described the prayers.

There was not really a prayer, different people stood up and said, "oh so-and-so hasn’t been well" and whatever, but it wasn’t really a prayer. The music was nothing that was religious. So it was kind of, well, I’m just not there yet and I’m not sure I want to be there.

Picking up on Margie's point that she is "not there yet," I ask if she sees herself or Holy Cross arriving at that point eventually. She responds that she needs more information but that she doesn't see the path that West Hill has pursued to be a viable option, "I don’t think so, not to that degree. Again, who knows? Maybe if I understood a little bit better what her purpose is?"

Returning to my question, I ask again, where Margie sees her faith going. Her response, not unlike Hedy's, is one that is rooted primarily in the community and the process of building a theology together.

I really, really hope that Pastor Dawn remains at Holy Cross for a long time because I feel like I really learn from her and the speaker series just is such a great way to find what you want to read next what you want to check next. Beyond that? I haven’t got a sense.

In doing so, Margie ties the future development of her faith to the larger church community and the choices that they will make concerning which texts to read and which texts authors to invite to the speaker series. What remains important is not which text or video or speaker is chosen but rather the act of choosing together as a community as shaping the future developments of Holy Cross.
Finally, when asking Sandra about the future of Christianity I found that she clearly indicates that her thinking has changed on the topic and that she is unconcerned about whether or not the church as an institution continues. In doing so she differentiates between 'Christianity', 'the church' and 'religious thinking'.

Rebekka: Where do you foresee Christianity going?

Sandra: I don't have a clue. I really don't have a clue and as I've said, "Christianity," that term doesn't mean a lot to me. If you had said: "the church?" Um, I would have said, initially, I would have said, not many years ago, "the church will last forever." I'm not so sure about that now. Maybe the church as an institution needs to fade but what that would mean as far as the nurturing that comes from a religious community? To consider the notion of a former church structure, we might be better off without that hierarchy and all that goes with it. I can see where that might happen, but as far as Christianity, I don't know, I have no notion about that.

Rebekka: Does that suggestion that the church might fade away, does that bother you, disappoint you, or worry you?

Sandra: No, no, no! Not in the context of—I'm assuming that does not mean the end of religious thought, spiritual thought, I'm making that assumption. But how that would all be nurtured without the institution? That would be most interesting to know. I don't know how that can happen.

Perhaps in this instance it would have been better had I asked, 'what is the future of progressive Christianity'? Implicit in the answers to my questions was an overriding ambiguity—in each instance it was easier for my interlocutors to focus on the future of fundamentalism, which represents the Protestant proximate other. Each affirmed that fundamentalists or other conservatives would continue on their chosen path without any diversions. Thomas tells me that they are "locked in their frameworks." Hedy reveals that their future is "destructive" because they continue to hold a worldview endorsing a "my way

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206 When this topic was addressed in formal interviews and informal conversations, there was a great degree of ambiguity. Often members would point out that there were no young people in the churches and that this indicated that it was unlikely that they would be able to continue to maintain the costs of church buildings and professional clergy.
or no way" approach. Margie turns to a discussion of progressive Christianity but only by offering it as a contrast to the problematic summer camp experience of her grandchildren. Finally Sandra places her former self in the position of the Protestant proximate other and says that she would have replied that "the church will go on forever." None, however, has an answer as to what the future for progressive Christianity will look like, but all are clear that it will not continue or be able to sustain the status quo.

**Concluding Remarks**

Of course, sustaining the status quo is not what progressive Christianity is about. As I have suggested the very ethos of progressive Christianity is one that evokes a fluid, continual and unfinished evolution of beliefs, practices and identity. In this chapter, I have argued that progressive Christianity involves the assumption of a new way of being Christian. This version of progressive Christianity is one that is constructed in relationship with and resistance to a Protestant proximate other. I have maintained that progressive Christians adopt a deconversion narrative as one of the primary models in which this antagonism can be observed.\(^{207}\) Since conversion as evangelicals understand it—the process of being 'born again'—stands as the means by which evangelical Christians construct their own version of Christianity against that of secular society, progressive Christians adopt similar linguistically-performative and cognitively-positioned frameworks in forming their version of Christianity against the Protestant proximate other. In this chapter and in the next chapter I explore the ways that linguistically-performative tropes enable progressive Christians to position themselves in tension.

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\(^{207}\) I have focused in this chapter upon deconversion narratives as told to me in private conversations. The performative aspect of deconversion narratives is often present in discussions during book study and discussion groups (see Chapter Three).
between the past, present and future, all three of which are ambiguous and inconclusive.
Chapter 5 – "Still, Already, Yet": A Linguistic Analysis of Eschatological Adverbs

We bustled about the room playing a get-to-know-you bingo themed ice breaker. The light-hearted nature of the questions on the bingo sheet set the tone for the evening. Statements such as 'find someone who can name all five Spice Girls' and 'get the name of someone who owns a Pez dispenser' were interspersed with more serious theological revelations: 'find someone who has answered an altar call'. The point of the game was to mingle, introduce ourselves and find someone who possessed a trait listed in one of the bingo sheet's boxes and write that person's name in the corresponding box. I was more willing to declare my love for novelty candy and my familiarity with the girl-power pop-sensations than to reveal my religious or spiritual leanings when asked: "which of these statements or traits describes you?".

Eventually someone shouted out "Bingo!" and we returned to our seats. Our facilitator for the evening, Ian, distributed the schedule for our three hour session together. The schedule included a short video clip, followed by small group discussions, a snack and social time, and a large group debriefing.

"Most people come to the book study for the socializing," whispered Kevin, one of the veterans of the study group. "And wait until you see the food! It can get quite competitive, really," he explained proudly. Kevin's assertion was confirmed later that evening when we were presented with an elaborate spread of fruits, cheeses, dips and baked goods.

The format of the progressive Christian reading group at West Hill United Church has not varied much in its thirty-plus years of existence. Indeed my time with the study group at
West Hill sounds strikingly similar to Hedy's description of the early group meetings in the previous chapter of this dissertation. The schedule of socializing, reading (or, more recently, watching video clips from the internet), and small group discussions, followed by large group discussions along with their friendly competitions of who can best nourish the group, is a tried-and-true format much beloved by its adherents. While the format itself has not changed over the years, the theology and the worldviews of the members of this community have transformed dramatically since the group initially formed. As noted in chapter two of this dissertation, since its inception, the book study group and the church itself have assumed a public profile. No longer a discrete group comprised of United Church of Canada folk who read popular theology and self-help texts in the main hall of their church, the group now sees itself as having established a model for adult education programs, a model which pushes the boundaries of what many progressive Christians believe is an emerging Reformation set to change the definitions of Christian identity, belief and practice. After watching two ten minute video clips featuring the so-called New Atheist thinkers Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, as well as a rebuttal clip featuring Christopher Hedges, we broke into smaller groups of six or seven to discuss our impressions.

"So does anyone still believe in God?" asked Cheryl, the group's chosen facilitator for the evening. Without waiting for a response, she pauses and amends her question: "does anyone still feel the need to believe in God? Who isn't ready to give up that image, yet?"

"Do you mean like the old-man in the clouds, with a long-flowing beard who watches over us and answers our prayers?", another woman asked. "I certainly don't believe in that type of God anymore!"

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208 Indeed, through the Centre for Progressive Christianity, West Hill provides study resources and manuals to other communities on how to run book study and discussion groups.
"Yes," a man chimed in, "we've already moved far past that God-concept."

The conversation proceeded from that point, and the six members collectively agreed that we certainly did not believe in the theistic version of God which is familiar to many of us from childhood. Furthermore, the group affirmed that if there is a God (not that they were saying there is) he (or she—most probably 'she') certainly does not resemble the traditional church representation of God. Ultimately, the group determined that, for progressive Christians, the best course of action would probably be to do away with this whole God-notion altogether. 209

Still, Already, Yet – Progressive Christianity: A Search for Definitions

Cheryl's questions—"does anyone still believe in God?" and "who isn't ready to give up that image yet?" may seem out of place in an ecclesiastical setting, but as this dissertation reveals they represent linguistic tropes that I observed employed in all five of the communities that I studied. Amid the light-hearted fun and competition to out-do each other in culinary excellence, members of the West Hill United Church book study group are attempting to recast Christianity as something that is not reliant on and is, from their perspective, moving past the traditional Christian apparatus, such as the bible, conventional notions of God, or even the church as an institutional structure. Of particular interest is their use of temporal adverbs like "still," "already" and "yet," which, along with their identification

209 This account is drawn from fieldwork conducted at West Hill United Church's spring 2009 book study which featured Sam Harris' Letter to a Christian Nation (2006) along with Christopher Hedges' I Don't Believe in Atheists (2008). The practice of reading two books simultaneously was new to this group and did not appear to be popular with the majority of the members. Spring 2009 was my second of three book study discussion groups with this community; in the fall of 2008 the group read Vosper's With or Without God (2008) and the following Spring 2010 we read John Ralston's Saul's A Fair Country (2008). It should be noted that Vosper does not participate in the book study, which is facilitated by individuals in the church community. Though the group frequently refers to Vosper's sermons and her text, they have a clear understanding of the book study as their own, independent of Vosper.
as "progressive," suggests a continual and unfinished evolutionary process of beliefs and practices that diverge from, and yet emerge out of, a normative, static Christian temporality (see Harding 2000: 230).

The use of the term "still" is especially prominent within progressive and theologically liberal communities. The suggestion that elements of the Christian narrative might "still" be held or believed hints at the possibility that ultimately there will be a point when such beliefs are no longer held. As such, the use of these temporally-oriented terms serve as a way to distinguish between what Jane Guyer (2007) identifies as two futures: 1) the near future and 2) the ideal, distant or eschatological, future. This chapter explores the ways in which a theology directed towards the distant future does so at the expense of the near future and (perhaps) without ever reaching its anticipated eschatological end.\footnote{In her article on the topic, Guyer (2007) contrasts the near future with ideal future. I have chosen the terms 'distant' and 'eschatological' over 'ideal' because they seem to fit better with the theological representations of temporality employed by the Christians I study. For many of the progressive Christians whom I have interviewed, the ultimate end in atheism is not necessarily an ideal; in private conversation, many of them speak apologetically or mournfully about their future position as atheists. Despite their discomfort, my subjects present themselves as resigned to their fate of becoming atheists because they see it as the most rational end of Christianity. Many of them pick up the imagery employed by John Shelby Spong, who speaks of this theology as a sacrifice for the greater good (language itself that replicates themes of Christian atonement and martyrdom theologies).}

According to Guyer's assessment the near future is a time of political action, a point in time when agency is activated and results are produced. Guyer compares macroeconomic theories, which are directed toward 'long-run' forecasts, with evangelical premillennial dispensationalism, which posits an ideal future when Jesus returns to earth (after a lengthy and gruesome apocalyptic period) to reign in glory with all of his followers. As Guyer shows, focus on an ideal future comes at the expense of action or agency in the near future. This process involves what she terms a "symmetrical evacuation" of both the near future and the near past (2007: 410) that prohibits political or social activity in relation to either. Further to
this point, Guyer argues that in the current, "postmodern" turn, which according to Frederic Jameson (2002) ushers in the 'end of temporality'—we have witnessed an attention to time when the "ultimate origins and distant horizons were both reinvigorated, whereas what fell between them was attenuating into airy thinness, on both 'sides' (past and future) of the 'reduction to the present'" (2007: 410). This discussion of temporal constructions in which attention is directed towards origins and the distant future is applicable to the progressive Christians of this study, whose focus on the origins of the Christian narrative through in-depth studies of biblical criticism are linked in this chapter to a discourse on beliefs and the ethics of belief that orients them to the distant future. Focusing on temporality is especially apt given the underlying despair about the present that many progressive Christians share with other mainline and liberal Christians, especially relative to the steady decline of their congregations and a perceived loss of relevancy within society.

As Guyer notes, "different temporal philosophies are ideologically marked and made culturally plausible and available" in such a way that these perspectives have an important effect on the social imagination (2007: 411). Much of the societal understanding of what it means to be modern stems from a temporal orientation that views time as moving forward in a chronological fashion (Latour 1993: 10; see below). Once again, to return to Cheryl's question and the group's insistence that the best course of action—that is, the moral course of action—would be to do away with the God notion completely introduces important questions about the ways in which progressive Christians position themselves as following or participating in a specific theological trajectory.

Other uses of the word "still" reflect the tenuous and fluid nature of theological thinking among mainline liberal Protestants. The United Church of Christ, for example,
adopted in 2004 the motto "God is still speaking" as part of a larger campaign to promote inclusiveness and relevance within the American-based denomination.²¹¹ According to the promotional material available on the United Church of Christ's website and Facebook page, the denomination promotes itself by explaining that "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." The "still speaking" campaign employs a temporal model and uses the image of a comma punctuation mark in its promotional material (see figure 7), as if to capture the phraseology about which God is presented as "still speaking." The video advertisements of the campaign, which were released virally over the internet, features an array of individuals of different ages, genders, abilities, disabilities, sexual affiliations and ethnicities and reminds the viewer that she should "never place a period where God has placed a comma."²¹²

[Figure 7 – God is still speaking, United Church for Christ website]

²¹¹ This campaign is of course directed towards those who might otherwise find affinity with many of the progressive Christians featured in this study (i.e. those who would most likely respond that God is not 'still' speaking, and more probably was never in the practice of speaking). For example, while the United Church of Christ and West Hill United Church share similar commitments to social justice causes and inclusivity they do not hold the same perspective on God. In my view, these theological distinctions stem from differences between American and Canadian streams of progressive Christianity but a detailed scholarly comparison is needed in order to support this claim.

²¹² Information on this campaign is available on the United Church of Christ's 'Still Speaking' campaign website http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/. (Accessed September 17, 2010).
In a very similar advertising campaign, West Hill United Church's website has a series of advertisements employing a similar trope that plays on the congregation's name "West Hill" (WE st'ill), so that the name is changed to indicate that which the church 'still' thinks, feels or believes (see figure 8).

[Figure 8 – "WE st'ill," West Hill United Church website]

These two examples serve to illustrate what I argue contributes to larger rhetorical and temporal representations of Christianity on the part of progressive Christianity.213

In this chapter, I maintain that the use of temporal adverbs, specifically the ones which, as I will show, facilitate the emergence of an eschatological trope—in terms of presenting time as linear and forward moving toward an ultimate end—stands as a core component in the construction of a progressive Christianity. I suggest that the use of eschatologically-based temporal language stems from traditional Protestant representations of time and also serves as a means of resisting conservative or traditional theology. Following Webb Keane (2007), Joel Robbins (2004, 2007) and Bruno Latour (1993), I examine ways that Protestant representations of time and morality endorse a specific understanding of...

213 This image is featured on the church’s homepage (http://www.westhill.net/). Other word plays upon the West Hill/We Still include: "Even though it’s hot, we still think church is cool" (used in the summertime); "We Still got rhythm" (advertising a benefit concert featuring one of the church’s members); "We still gather in Scarborough but you’re virtually everywhere (a message directed to online followers who participate in worship services at West Hill through podcasts).
Christian subjecthood that is continuously transitioning according to what Latour identifies as a drive for purification (see Chapter 3). Building on these theories, I consider how themes of the Protestant self brought into conversation with a modern liberal worldview and assumptions about the empirical nature of science enabled, and in many ways spurred, the rejection and reformulation of specific doctrines and theologies by progressive Christians.214

This chapter will engage with these concerns specifically through an in depth analysis of the linguistic tropes used in conversations about the purpose and ethics of belief.

My interest in language is generated in part by my interlocutors themselves (cf. Harding 1987; Coleman 2006a; Keane 1997b).215 As one participant from St. Matthias Anglican Church wrote to our small book study group of nine after a particularly stimulating

214 My use of the term 'modern' is employed with full recognition of the ambiguities inherent in both scholarly and non-scholarly applications of the term. I agree with Bruno Latour that there are as many definitions of modernity as there are theorists to define it. Like Latour I affirm that in one way or another all definitions of modernity point to the passage of time and apply the term descriptively in such a way that it contrasts with the past which is often represented as archaic and unwavering (Latour 1993: 10).

Following Keane, I point to modernity as a term that has become a "ubiquitous part of historical consciousness" (2007: 26) and is useful as a self-descriptive category for both those who understand themselves as modern and those who do not. My focus, like Keane's is on the way that modernity understands its project as a moral one and creates a space for particular moral forms to emerge. Central features implied within this category include an emphasis upon "the individual's agency, inwardness, and freedom," which translates into "possibilities for individual self-transformation" expanded beyond the realm of societal elites to the masses (2002: 68). Keane nuances this view of modernity by pointing out that a devalued vision of tradition has the effect of promoting "social and individual change" with an eye to historical self-consciousness. As Keane puts it, "the heart of the version of the modern in the conjunction of personal and historical self-transformation with a vision of the self, abstracted from material and social entanglements" (2002: 68). Keane draws upon both Marshall Berman (1982) and Charles Taylor (1989) in this discussion. Keane's discussion draws upon particular forms or modalities of Protestantism that stem out of Calvinist encounters with missionary fields and particular understandings of transcendence and materiality that are created through these encounters.

In my fieldwork, discussions of the modern era follow normative folk categories for this topic; my interlocutors use the term modern in reference to our current temporal age (having commenced with the Enlightenment, Industrialization, post-World War II or with the so-called technological revolution in the 1990s). Specifics of when modernity commenced are not as important as the intention of the term itself, which was purported to contrast with a previous, less advanced era—either technologically, theologically, intellectually, socially or politically—than our contemporary time. At one of my churches, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, the Pastor on at least two separate occasions taught that the modern era is, in fact, over and that we currently reside in postmodern times. Implicit in these discussions of both the modern and the postmodern is the assumption that humans as moral agents move through history with the goal of progress—moral, technological, theological, intellectual and social, etc.

215 West Hill United Church, for example, has a 110 page document outlining their official policy on language. This document is available on the church's website at http://www.westhill.net/documents/language_policy.pdf.
discussion of Ekhart Tolle's *A New Earth* (2008), "the traditional language is not bad, just not accessible enough to 21st century Earthlings to be of great value." These concerns around the ways in which languages and ideas are made accessible and deemed authentic were evident in many of the individual and group conversations, as well as sermons and lectures at all of the churches in this study (cf. Shoaps 2002: 34). Following scholars interested in linguistic analysis (Harding 1994; Stromberg 1993; Shoaps 2002), and indeed attending to the concerns of my interlocutors, I look to the ways that linguistic tropes, rhetoric and narrative can be understood as "discourse that constitutes reality, not language that (erroneously) represents reality." In such an analysis, the focus needs to shift from "cause-and-effect questions about why people do things and why they believe things . . . toward questions of figuration and contestation" (Harding 1994: 61). In other words, I am interested in the ways that progressive Christianity is constructed through specific discourses and the means through which it accumulates and maintains power and authority.

Anthropological explorations of temporal thinking as an orientation to the future have been rare in the field of religious studies and in anthropology in general (Guyer 2007; see also Wallman 1992). Linguistic anthropologist Robin Shoaps (2009) suggests that North American Christianity centres itself on "temporality, authority and the balance between divine and human agency" (2009: 2). Shoaps' work on the so-called "Elijah Generation" and prophetic material and practices within radical Pentecostal and charismatic communities leads her to conclude that what she identifies as an 'End-Times chronotope' becomes the means through which the prophetic self is fashioned. This 'End-Times chronotope' serves as a central means through which the "Elijah Generation" distinguishes itself from other forms of Pentecostalism or charismatic Christianities, many of which deem it to be heretical. The
appeal to an "Elijah Generation" is used to differentiate this movement temporally and to position it in the immediate or near future—members of the 'Elijah Generation' are thought to be currently children and teenagers—through an appeal to the ancient-mythic past.\footnote{The reference is to the ancient Israelite prophet Elijah, who is traditionally understood to be one of the greatest and most powerful prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. The sentiment among those advocating a coming prophetic generation is likened to John the Baptist, whom many interpret Jesus is describing through Elijah in Matthew 17:11-12.}

A more in depth analysis of the Elijah Generation discourse is needed in order to determine whether or not their prescribed future is accessible. Following Guyer's analysis it seems unlikely that this generation will always be 'about to prophetically transform' the world. This generation is presented as one that will redeem the church, calling believers into repentance and holiness, and thereby represents the impetus for a new (and better) Christian age. The rhetoric about this generation is steeped in temporality focused on imminence. Those who are considered to be agents within this movement are labelled "history-makers," a 'chronotope' of sorts that casts the tension between the individual adherent and the larger community into a locality that aligns the present with the eschatological future and its history.

Working within a similar vein, anthropologist of Christianity Jon Bialecki (2009a), notes that for the charismatic Christians he studies,\footnote{Bialecki's work has involved seven years of ethnographic fieldwork in a Southern Californian Vineyard community, which he describes as aligning with the charismatic and evangelical Christian Left.} a future-oriented political rhetoric permits an understanding of the adherents' role in society as suspended between events that are described as simultaneously having already and not yet occurred (2009a: 116). For Bialecki's subjects, social justice activities are mandated by the Kingdom of God and require Christian adherents to participate in the transformation of society but this transformation is one that is held in tension between the incarnation and the eschaton. Thus while his subjects
affirm leftist social justice causes like immigration reform, democracy in the developing world, and civil unions for same sex couples, their actual involvement in such causes is limited by their theological and ontological positions, which stem from a belief that transformation will occur with the eschaton and the return of Christ—an event that both is in the future and has already occurred in the present moment. Bialecki argues that despite their social justice rhetoric, the charismatics in his study are in a permanent state of suspension and tension between the present and the future and will likely never achieve their social justice goals, which require the onset of the Kingdom of God in order to actually occur.

Bialecki further notes that many within the charismatic progressive Christian Left\footnote{Bialecki's use of the term "progressive Christian" is not synonymous with mine. While the progressive Christians in my study share political and social justice commitments with Bialecki's subjects, as well as with leftist leaders in the evangelical community (such as Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, Shane Claiborne), there is little knowledge of, or interaction between, these movements. On several occasions my interlocutors reported to me that they are much more comfortable collaborating politically with atheists and liberal members of other religious communities than they are with evangelical or charismatic Christians. The reason was usually a perceived 'closed-mindedness' on the part of theologically conservative Christians, specifically related to their understanding of Jesus, atonement and salvation.} employ the rhetoric of the Minor Prophets and posit justice for the oppressed as the signature, or realization, of the so-called Kingdom of God. The subjects of his study understand themselves as partly responsible for bringing about the necessary political actions in order to establish a new political order. Despite their stated intention to bring about social change, Bialecki notes that because of their understanding of Christian temporality as "fundamentally discontinuous" (2009a: 120) they are in many ways constrained by the present moment that orients them towards an assured but inaccessible future directed by a divine entity that is defined by its alterity (2009a: 116).

While deriving from a very different theological and ontological stance that results in an even more divergent worldview, the progressive Christians in my study likewise endorse a specifically eschatologically-oriented conception of their roles as adherents that dictates their
participation in, and practice of, their faith. Unlike Bialecki's subjects, the progressive Christians in this study are constrained by neither alterity nor divine immanence of any sort. Instead they look forward to an instance when theological beliefs will be dispensed with and no longer necessary. This rejection of core beliefs emerges from an emphasis on the morality or ethics of belief, through which they argue it is unethical to hold beliefs that are scientifically implausible and/or do not cohere to a modern liberal worldview.

For progressive Christians the ultimate end is atheism, and the tone with which they tell me that they still believe certain elements is apologetic, almost reminiscent of a child who resolves to do better next time around.

I'm not a Christian like that, but I'm also not an atheist like that," Suzan explained to me in a crowded coffee shop over her lunch break. "I don't want people to think I'm like Richard Dawkins, but I also don't want them to think I'm like Jerry Falwell. I guess we're Christian because that's what we've always been. It's our heritage. I don't personally use the term Christian anymore, I usually tell people I'm an atheist who goes to church.

In this example, Suzan, reveals that the tension is not merely one possessed by individuals but rather is held and resolved within the community itself. Suzan is an active lay-leader at her church and her views represent those of the inner core, many of whom identify as atheists.

During one of the book study events Suzan led another member of the community, Stewart, through an online survey from the popular religion website 'Beliefnet' while the rest of the group watched.\(^{219}\) The point of the survey is to determine, or suggest, within which

\[^{219}\text{The survey, called The Belief-O-Matic Survey is available in the 'Entertainment' section of the beliefnet website. The application begins with the following introduction and disclaimer:}

Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-MaticTM knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic™ will tell you what religion (if any) you practice...or ought to consider practicing.

Warning: Belief-O-Matic™ assumes no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul.
religious community the respondent would feel most comfortable, or which religious affiliation is best suited to his worldview. Stewart's final results suggested, unsurprisingly, that he should be a 'secular humanist'. I met with him the next day and our conversation naturally gravitated toward his answers to the survey.

Rebekka: Now on the belief-o-matic survey last night, you said that you don't believe in God, that you don't believe in any sort of divine incarnation, you don't believe in heaven or hell. These are fairly radical views for someone in a church community.

Stewart: Yes.

Rebekka: Do you think that most people at West Hill hold the same views or do you consider yourself to be sort of at one extreme?

Stewart: Umm. I'm probably a bit more radical than some.

Rebekka: Okay.

Stewart: But I would say that the answers that I gave—and I answered only nineteen of the twenty questions because for the one, there just wasn't an answer that I could give—I would say that if you were to ask (pause) seventy percent of the congregation they would probably answer similarly to me for about eighty percent of the answers.

Rebekka: Okay.

Stewart: We have some people who attend with their spouse who still believe that there will be a judgement day, etc, etc. They're quite happy to attend because they love the fellowship in the church and the fact that their spouse is fed. There aren't too many but there are some.

Rebekka: Now do you have—do you want to qualify your answer to whether or not you believe in God? I know a lot of progressive Christians—while they'll say they don't believe in God—they do have a sense of something they could call God. Do you have any?

The survey is intentionally light-hearted and the community's interaction with the survey was likewise lighthearted. It can be accessed online at http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Quizzes/BeliefOMatic.aspx. Stewart reported to me that he has completed the survey a number of times over the past few years. Reflecting on this experience, he explained, "the first time I came through as 'mainline liberal.' And then I sort of moved towards the 'neo-pagan' and another group they called the 'Advanced Quaker group'—I can't exactly remember what they call it. I was moving this way <motions to the left>. The 'Secular-humanist' part didn't really start to show up until about two years ago."
Stewart: I used to.

Rebekka: You used to, okay.

Stewart: I haven't been able to find it recently. I can't really understand how the laws of the universe together are controlled by a supreme power. If they are!! I have a hard time believing that there would be a God. More the—how things have developed through natural selection. I'm sure that's it.

Rebekka: Okay.

Stewart: And I'm guessing that thirty-five or fifty billion years ago, there's a lot of things happening. Well, now the origin of them? I have no idea. I have no idea what-so-ever.

Rebekka: Are you concerned about it? About the origin of things?

Stewart: Umm, no, other than realising that you can't destroy matter, you can change matter or its form. You know? How it happened or where it came from. I'm not worried about that.

Rebekka: Umm.

Stewart: Give me a few more years.

Rebekka: (laughs). A few more years? Okay. Often when I tell people about my research and I'm explaining about West Hill and what they believe, people say: "well, they're not Christian; it's very obvious." Especially my students, when I tell my students about West Hill, they'll say, "it's very obvious that they're not Christians." How do you respond to this accusation?

Stewart: I don't consider myself a Christian.

Rebekka: Okay.

Stewart: But I realise that being a part of an organisation such as the United Church of Canada allows the group to move forward and (pause) umm, gives some sort of authenticity. I don't know if I want it. I'm not sure about that. I don't want to think of us—I've heard Baptists described as a group that multiplies by division.

Rebekka: (laughs). Okay.

Stewart: You've probably heard that before.

Rebekka: I have (laughs).
Stewart: So, Ummm, I think, ahhh, the chance of ummm, ahhh, people coming to a point where they are loving their neighbour—a community such as West Hill is [one] which has ties that can recognize it. That's why I feel that we should be [Christian].

In the above discussion, Stewart identifies several key components of individual and communal understandings of progressive Christianity: rejection of traditional Christian beliefs, desire for a community that is perceived of as authentic, an emphasis on scientific explanations regarding the origins of the universe. He positions himself temporally in regards to his beliefs: he "used to" believe in a God-like force but he "hasn't been able to find it lately" and has "a hard time believing that there would be a God." Stewart also positions the community temporally as containing individuals who "still" believe for various reasons. Moreover, Stewart points out that, while he is not Christian, the community is located within the United Church of Canada. He indicates that while not ideal, the identity of the community as a church is preferable to the sectarian approach which he aligns with Baptists—without distinguishing which Baptists he is referring to—who, as the Protestant proximate other, have chosen a path that is most certainly undesirable.²²⁰

In many ways Stewart typifies an approach to religion that holds belief as the primary category of Christian identity. Interestingly, he simultaneously rejects core Christian beliefs and tenets in determining his own understanding of what is necessary for one to become a Christian. Stewart's beliefs, or his inability to believe, serve as the core marker of his religious agency. Closely related to this characteristic are intersecting concerns about interiority and sincerity which emerge from a specific Protestant understanding of what it

²²⁰ The United Church of Canada, formed in 1925 has served as a great experiment in contemporary Christian ecumenism. After a long journey toward church union, the United Church positioned itself as an inclusive community, one in which a variety of theological perspectives are both welcome and encouraged (see for example, Airhart and Hutchinson 1996; King 2010).
means "to believe." In the next section of this chapter, I offer an anthropological analysis that juxtaposes the ethics of belief, the morality of language and related Protestant assumptions about sincerity, integrity and earnestness.

**The Believing, Speaking, Ethical, Christian Agent: Progressive Christians and Language Ideologies**

The ethics of belief is a core concern for many progressive Christians. Supported by a scientific worldview, liberal ideologies and popular knowledge of biblical criticism, many progressive Christians struggle with the tensions between a traditional Christian worldview and their own difficulty in assenting to the miraculous, or 'unpopular', claims of the Christian narrative. This struggle, which emerged during the Victorian era, is conveyed primarily as a moral one in which intellectual honesty and assent to the traditions of the Christian narrative (creeds, doctrines, etc.) vie for precedence (see Livingston 1974). Current discourses revealing this tension point towards a prevailing view held by contemporary Christians, which presents belief as an ethical or moral stance that may be evaluated through an examination of an individual adherent's interior state and character (Elisha 2008; Asad

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221 Wilfred Cantwell Smith's works, *Belief and History* (1977) and *Faith and Belief* (1979) remain extremely important and influential genealogical and etymological analyses of belief in the Western world. Current definitions are, according to Smith, tainted by notions of literalism and uncertainty as to the accuracy of a belief statement, so that belief refers to a conviction as in "the holding of certain ideas" which can then be judged to be 'true' or 'false,' for example, the belief that the earth is flat (see Smith 1979:12). In Christian theology, belief often corresponds with ultimate questions pertaining to the existence of God or of the miraculous. In this schema, belief is proffered as the means through which one acquires salvation (access to heaven), and understanding promoted by Pascal's infamous wager (see Lopez 1998: 23). Smith's works have been popularized by many of the authors read by progressive Christians. Thus in my conversations with progressive Christians and in sermons delivered at progressive churches, there is often reference to the idea that absolute assent to Christian tenets is a corruption.

222 By 'unpopular' I refer to those passages in scripture which do not conform to modern liberal, or inclusive moral perspectives (e.g. scriptural passages that appear to reprimand homosexuality, condone war and bloodshed, support violence against women and children or advocate anti-Semitism). For an in-depth popular discussion of these types of texts, see progressive Christian author Bishop John Shelby Spong's book, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal God's Love* (2005).
1993; see also Chapter 4). As noted in my introduction, a rejection of certain beliefs (or stipulation that certain beliefs will be rejected in the future) emerges from an emphasis on the morality or ethics of belief—a position from which the progressive Christians featured in this study argue that it is unethical to hold beliefs that are scientifically implausible and/or do not cohere to a modern liberal moral worldview. As such, they posit atheism as the natural outcome of this emphasis on the ethics of belief.

Scholars of contemporary Christianity interested in religious language and Protestant rhetoric have focused on the ways that religious language shapes and is shaped by specific Protestant theological and ontological beliefs, as well as the ways that religious conceptions of the subject are shaped by certain linguistic patterns and tropes. These studies are important because they reveal that language serves as an important means through which an adherent’s interior state is accessed by others or by the individual herself (Keane 2002: 74). These studies have examined the ways in which approaches to religiously-derived language function to reconstitute the identity of both the listener and the speaker (Stromberg 1993 and 1990), delineate practices of spontaneity and entextualization (Shoaps 2002), construct new or alternative forms of agency (Keane 2004) and stand in place of, or as evidence for, the transcendent (Coleman 2006a).

These above mentioned studies of (mostly) evangelical and charismatic Christians reveal two important characteristics about contemporary Protestant linguistic practices. First, within these communities a subjective or 'personalized' religiosity is preferred and juxtaposed to mainline Christianity, which is seen as static, overly routinized and irrelevant (Shoaps 2002: 35; Smith 1998; Keane 2007: 1-2; 40; Wolfe 2003: 22). Interestingly, these critiques of mainline Protestant churches are similar to those levied by progressive Christians. Citing
these similarities, I contend that impulses similar to those that Keane and others identify as core to an evangelical, charismatic, Calvinist or "modern" Christianity, and its related concerns about sincerity and interiority, animates the ways in which progressive Christians understand themselves as separate from the rest of Christianity (both the evangelical and mainline manifestations). Second, for Keane, within Protestantism language is understood in moral terms. A normative Protestant perspective assumes that the act of speaking reveals something about the speaker's character and that the authority of a linguistic action is directly related to the authority of the speaking subject. These two observations suggest that, for progressive Christians, the ethics of belief are most clearly located in instances when language is understood to be spontaneous, transparent and sincere. Yet greatest authority is rooted in both the individual's theological experience which often recounted as a traumatic change as well as reading and studying biblical criticism.

At West Hill United Church an emphasis on referential language serves as the primary means through which the ethics of belief are revealed. Specifically there is a desire that the liturgical texts recited and the hymns sung during the service reflect the actual beliefs of the community. As Gretta Vosper explained to me in an interview conducted in 2005, the metaphorical understanding of Christianity common in liberal churches poses a problem for progressive Christians who would like to expand their communities: "If somebody walks in off the street who hasn't been indoctrinated into that new metaphorical understanding of everything, they'll still just think 'Oh my God! Do they really believe this? Do I have to believe it? Do I have to come to believe it in order to be part of this community?'" (Vosper in...

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\(^{223}\) Keane's understanding of spontaneity and sincerity are bound up together. From his perspective, Christian moderns are able to determine who an individual (or community) is by considering the individual's spontaneous language and actions. As revealed in the example below, progressive Christians value sincerity although their services lack the spontaneity that Keane describes as core to contemporary Protestantisms. As this dissertation reveals it is in the book study and discussion group that progressive Christians enact sincerity.
Concerns around 'sincerity', 'earnestness' and 'integrity' explored in this chapter are evident in Vosper's comments, which promote the idea that it is disingenuous to make statements during a religious service that do not reflect the beliefs, experiences and worldview of that particular community.

This approach which is shared by progressive Christians and more conservative forms of Christianity, promotes a belief that language corrupts and must always be carefully considered and reconsidered in an attempt to communicate the most accurate message. Whereas a metaphorical approach determines that there is no antidote to the problems inherent in language, and therefore the true or pure intention of the communicative act is located somewhere beyond language, progressive Christians seek to refine language to a point where it is able to communicate the 'essential truths' in a non-metaphorical manner. This approach is justified by pointing to the fact that in a secular, post-Christian multicultural society, specific theological norms of the Christian narrative no longer possess the same currency that they might have in a more homogenous Christian society. Vosper's reference to someone coming off the street into their community reflects the multicultural realities of Scarborough, where her church is located, which is comprised of mostly new immigrants to Canada.

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Many mainline liberals have adopted a metaphorical approach to religious language. For instance, theological thinkers and scholars such as Hans Frei (1974), Sallie McFague (1982), Northrop Frye (1982; 1991), Robert Funk (1996) and Marcus Borg (2001; 2003) advocate a reading of scripture and liturgy that suggests the miraculous be understood as an attempt by the authors to express sentiments and experiences that transcend human descriptive categories. For these thinkers the language of the bible should be read not as a historical event but rather as a verbal event, which is perceived as communicating something that is too important to be expressed in descriptive language (see Aiken 1991: xi; Denham 2003: 73).

Interestingly, Borg, whose work promotes a metaphorical theology of language, is often referred to by the progressive Christians I have studied as "a good starting point," but many have claimed that "he does not go far enough" in his theological thinking and that he is too eager to bridge the gap between traditional theology and progressive, or what he calls, emergent theology (not to be confused with the Emerging Church Movement that has its roots in contemporary evangelical theology). While many of the Christians I have studied cite Borg (along with Spong, Pagels and Harpur) as their introduction to progressive thinking, they are adamant that the next step, an even more radical theology is necessary in order to, as one of my interlocutors expressed it, "release the final shackles of the Churchianity."
Vosper's explanation suggests that she and her community hold a referential language ideology in which what one says is more important than how one says something. It is precisely this language ideology that Vosper assumes when she has her would-be adherent from off the street ask: "Do they really believe this?" and more interestingly, "do I have to come to believe it in order to be part of this community?" Implicit in this understanding of language is the concept that language is interactive. The would-be adherent from the street locates the authority of spoken words in the individual agent who is seen as "a distinct and self-possessed self" responsible for her verbal speech act (Keane 2002: 75). Our would-be adherent is able to evaluate the interior character of the individuals in Vosper's community based upon their collective act of public recitation of prayers and hymns. According to Vosper's theological worldview, traditional prayers no longer have currency in the contemporary world because they do not serve as a sincere reflection of the community's beliefs and do not accurately communicate to a would-be adherent the prerequisites for membership within their church.

Interestingly, there is no consideration of how the would-be adherent might be transformed by becoming an adherent. In conservative and evangelical varieties of Christianity the would-be adherent is considered to be radically transformed through the born again experience. It is through this transformation that one gains access to Christian membership in many Protestant communities. In my previous chapter, I laid out the ways that a deconversion narrative adopts many of the attributes and frameworks of the born again testimony. Indeed, as I revealed, many of the progressive Christians I spoke with felt that they had become new selves through their encounter with progressive Christian thinking. That being said, the notion that once one has been transformed they will more fully
understand their religiosity is not present within progressive Christian communities. Instead, progressive Christians posit that theirs is a way of being Christian that is completely rational and transparent to the non-believer or non-adherent and that no inner transformation is required in order for progressive Christianity to make sense to an outsider.

What is most important in this discussion of language ideologies is the idea that the moral realm, which is culturally and linguistically constructed, is thought to be located within each individual agent and manifest in his or her actions, thoughts and words. Keane explains that for 'modern' Christians, concerns about language usage relate to whether or not the volition behind the words is deemed to have been a sincere act of agency or human freedom. It is important to note that sincerity is not only located in the words themselves but also reveals the overall character of the speaker or the community. A further illustration of this resolve for sincerity can be found in the work of linguistic anthropologist Robin Shoaps (2002). Shoaps adopts the term 'earnestness,' which is employed by her interlocutors. She explains that "it is similar to the interrelated Western concepts of sincerity, truth and intentionality" (2002: 42). Following Shoap's practice, I adopt the term "intellectual integrity" from my interlocutors. This term is specific to the communities I have studied and has a longer standing history within progressive Christian and liberal theological circles. Indeed, one could easily trace a genealogy of intellectual integrity within modern Christianity. The term is especially useful because it points to specific concerns of the progressive Christian community that might not be shared by the Calvinist converts of Keane's study or the charismatics of Shoaps' work. Intellectual integrity points to the especially cerebral and empirical focus of the progressive Christian community and thus bringing this term into conversation with Shoaps and Keane provides both an opportunity to
explore similarities and to delineate differences in the use and understanding of language in each instance.

As Keane explains, the desire on the part of an individual to align his or her expressions with his or her interior state is linked to the identification of this individual as a moral agent.\(^{225}\) An exploration of the morality of language, as it has been undertaken by anthropologists, is necessary in order to delineate how and why progressive Christians pursue certain linguistic practices (see Heintz 2009; Howell 1997). Additionally important is the examination of assumptions concerning what constitute moral actions, usually the appeal to the notion of moral reasoning as a conscious activity (Zigon 2007: 133; Robbins 2004: 315). Robbins explains that within the conscious realm, moral or ethical considerations serve as sites where attention to change will be more clearly delineated and registered on the part of adherents. In his presentation of the moral domain, Robbins proposes that morality is culturally constructed in such a way that moral norms of a given society are collectively generated (2004: 316; see also Robbins 2009).\(^{226}\) Instances when morality observably changes therefore emerge from points of structural change in culture (as in the example in Robbins’ fieldwork among the Urapmin people who converted en masse to Christianity in the 1970s).

\(^{225}\) There are of course exceptions to the referential quality of words within this language ideology. These are, as Stromberg points out, often communicated through facial gestures or through tone, as in the case of sarcastic or ironic statements (Stromberg 1993: 10). When considering religion, one might assume that the performative language of ritual would be excluded from consideration under this language ideology (e.g. as in the recitation of creedal statements). As my previous example from Vosper reveals, this exception is not present amongst the progressive Christians in this study.

\(^{226}\) Zigon (2007) complicates Robbins’ assumption that morality rests in the domain of consciousness, an assumption which suggests that this definition limits our perspectives on morality. He explains that “a person is not only moral when he or she must make a conscious decision to be so” (2007: 133). Indeed a strong argument could be made linking morality to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. Robbins’ description here, however, is meant to distinguish between moral actions and thoughts which are deliberated and enacted versus those which are in Western thinking deemed to not to be so for reasons of insanity (see Robbins 2007: 316).
Morality and temporality are, of course, intimately linked in many religious traditions. If one were to consider a so-called normative Christian representation of morality, it posits a heavenly (or post-eschatological) realm in which perfect morality is taken for granted. In this schema, one's actions in history or time predetermine one's place in this location of perfect morality. In other words, moral actions are rewarded with a place in heaven.\footnote{This perspective is contingent upon a view of agency and a theology that assumes freewill for all humans and lends primary authority to individualism as it has developed over time in modern Western ontological thinking.} I will return to this assumption below, since it bears important consideration when examining progressive Christianity precisely because progressive Christians do not posit a belief in heaven. In fact, as I have already explained, traditionally constructed beliefs in heaven, or life after death, are seen as immoral or unethical according to a progressive Christian worldview.

Keane's work relies heavily on terms developed by Latour (1993), who suggests that modernity is built upon a desire for liberation brought about through a dialectical process of 'translation' and 'purification'.\footnote{Keane points out that this narrative of liberation can be seen in diverse 'modern' emancipatory projects of from Marxist depictions of religion as an opiate to liberal and therapeutic notions of self-fulfilment to Western denunciations of Islam (2007: 5). One could also include the 'new Reformation' for which progressive Christians advocate.} Latour roots the drive for translation and purification in theological, legal and scientific developments in the seventeenth century (Latour 1993: 15-35; cf. Shapin and Schaffer 1985). In Latour's assessment of the modern world, seventeenth century developments in scientific, legal and theological thinking linked empirical observations with the perceived integrity of an observer. The scientists in their laboratory must be "credible, trustworthy, well-to-do witnesses" who are able to "attest to the existence of a fact, the matter of fact, even if they do not know its true nature" (Latour 1993: 18). As was discussed previously in Chapter Three, Latour's notion of purification is extremely
important in order to comprehend progressive Christian approaches to scripture. I have argued that progressive Christians understand their reading of scripture as one that purifies the Christian narrative through a scholarly process but that it is meaningful primarily because it serves as a venue through which they are able to reject those characteristics of the Christian Right—their Protestant proximate other.

For example, one of the venues which progressive Christians often seek to purify—especially when it comes to language and practices—is the public sphere. Promoting the hallmark separation between church and state, despite the fact that they are Canadians, the progressive Christians in my research assume a Christian modality in which secular subjectivities are seen as ideal. Fearful of the growing presence and influence of evangelical and conservative Christians in both political and socio-cultural realms, many of the progressive Christians featured in my study advocate that evangelicals and conservatives should have a diminished voice when it comes to public policy. When asked for specific examples, many objected to institutional religious commentaries on social welfare systems, the death penalty, reproductive rights, immigration and equal marriage.

Their descriptions and critiques of conservatives and evangelicals proliferate; progressive Christians are critical of the role that faith played in former American president George Bush's invasion of Iraq. Closer to home they condemn Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his adoption of what they call "evangelical religious skepticism," by which they claim he ignores the environmental damage caused by Canada's withdrawal from the Kyoto protocol and increased funding for initiatives to develop the oil sands in Alberta.

229 Unlike in the United States, the separation of church and state is not an official policy for Canada (Noll 2001b: 130, 161).
The underlying concern of progressive Christians is that the intersection of religion and politics promotes an agenda that is averse to scientific and rational debate.

For example, during the course of my research at West Hill, several congregants watched the well-known documentary film, *Jesus Camp* (2006) during a movie night and social event at the church. The film outlines the day-to-day operations of a charismatic children's summer camp in which the campers are encouraged to develop charismatic gifts and instructed in political protest manoeuvres. The progressive Christians featured in my dissertation were—like many other viewers of the film—horrified by the tactics of the adult figures featured in the film, particularly the perceived manipulation of innocent children to the ends of political engagement. What I noticed and found most interesting about their discussions was that the children were perceived to be somehow "pure," dressed up in political rhetoric and out of place in the public sphere. While examples of critiquing conservative Christianity are the most prominent, progressive Christians are also reproachful of public and political engagement on the part of progressives and liberals as religious agents, arguing that they should instead enter public discussions and debates as secularists.

Following the July 2010 announcement by Terry Jones, pastor of the Christian Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida, that he planned to burn 200 Qurans on the anniversary of the September 11th attacks, many Christians—conservatives, evangelicals and liberals—and other religious figures denounced Jones' plans. Many religious organizations planned interfaith events to display their solidarity and made proclamations that Jones and his community were not "true" Christians and that their actions were in opposition to the teachings of Jesus and indeed of all religions. For example, the Network of Spiritual Progressives led by Rabbi Michael Lerner planned a special event that day calling Jews,
Christians, Muslims and people of no religion to gather together and read from the Quran as a sign of solidarity and support.

While admitting that the Network of Spiritual Progressives had adopted an admirable cause, Vosper found fault with the course of action they pursued. In an article, "Fraying Claims: Challenging Progressives beyond Their Chosen Response to the Burning of the Koran" (2010), she responded by positioning herself as a modern day iconoclast, criticizing the religious elements of the interfaith gathering. Vosper disagreed with their decision to read from the Quran, arguing that to do so reified the authoritative power of scriptural texts and indeed lent credibility to the proposed Quran burnings. In her article, Vosper explains:

The truth of the matter is that the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are filled with violence, divisiveness, condemnation. So, too, are they filled with passages that condone the destruction of property and persons of other belief systems and nationalities. True, too, is the reality that such content can, and as Jones has reminded us, will be used for appalling purposes. The pastor in Florida is only doing what he believes his God expects him to do. It's a God he would deny for no one. Not for his president, Barack Obama, who pleaded with him on behalf of Americans around the world, not to go ahead with his plan. Not for his evangelical brother in the faith, Rick Warren, who has called it a "cowardly act." Not for any "progressive" Christian like me or Diana Butler Bass who drives a car with a COEXIST bumper sticker on it, each of the letters formed from the symbol of a different religion. And he is certainly not going to deny his God for a progressive Jew like Michael Lerner who is bringing together Jews and Muslims and Christians to participate in what Jones could only ever think was against God's plan. Jones won't deny his God for anyone. The frightening reality we must face is that he has come to know that God through the Bible, a text most Christians would argue has the right to be called sacred (Vosper 2010: 2).

Instead, Vosper argues that the role of liberal and progressive Christians—and Jews and Muslims—should be to limit the authoritative power of the biblical texts. The act of reading them in the public sphere asserts their power and implies that Jones' proposed actions represent a valid form of protest. In the words of Vosper,
Either the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, and any other books identified as divinely ordained are just that or they aren't. If they aren't the authoritative word of some divine being or divinely inspired prophet, then we who are the heirs of the critical scholarship that has taken us to new understandings need to stop acting as though they are. Every time we ground an argument in these ancient texts, every time we come up with a new definition for "god" that doesn't support a literal reading of the texts, every time we process a Bible into a worship space, reverence a mezuzah, speak of the Koran as having been "revealed," we are reinforcing the authority anyone can then claim that gives those documents a power they do not deserve. In fact, we are arguing that anyone has the right to do so. After all, the fundamentalists are the ones doing what the text says (Vosper 2010: 3).

"Our world's needs demand more from us," (2010: 3) Vosper continues, placing an assumed secularity into the realm of ethical action. Rather than reinforcing the religious rhetoric of the text, Vosper posits that religious and non-religious agents need to come together as secular citizens in order to promote solidarity and to protect the rights of religious groups and minorities. The first step in doing so is to displace scriptures from their special or authoritative positions.

For Vosper and the other progressive Christians featured in my research, presenting primarily a secular self in public spaces is an ethical imperative; it is experienced as what Keane identifies as an almost compulsory component of the "moral narrative of modernity" (Keane 2007). Following Keane, I suggest that Vosper's insistence that Christians engage in political debates as secular, rather than religious, agents stems from an understanding of secularity as the more ethical, sincere and authentic stance precisely because it does not allow agency to be displaced to alternative narratives, texts and traditions. According to Keane, this secular stance itself emerges out of particular Protestant notions of subjectivity, temporality, materiality and their attendant practices (see additionally, Keane n.d.).

In advocating that liberal Christians and other religious agents should enter the public sphere without the trappings of their religious traditions, Vosper imagines a public space that
has been purified of irrational and non-empirical elements. Not unlike her image of the aforementioned would-be adherent, Vosper imagines that the public sphere is occupied by individuals who insist that one's actions and words in the public/secular realm must be objectifiable—an end which Keane purports "has become a general expectation within the frame of secularism" (Keane n.d.: 10). There is a sense that while in the public realm—that is, the realm of political, socio-cultural and economic organizations—one needs to strip away those elements of one's self that are not objectifiable. In other words, one needs to be more than oneself: a truer, purer, more authentic, better self in public spaces. Pursuing this theme of pure agents in pure spaces, Keane's appropriation of Latour's arguments concerning purification leads us to look more explicitly for evidence of translation and hybridization. To a certain extent, the project of attempting to eliminate the displacement of agency onto narratives, traditions or, in this case, scripture spurs a realignment of agency so that it comes to rest in secular spaces. Vosper's explanation that the "world's needs demand more from us" is almost sacrificial in its tone, as she calls on other liberal and progressive religious agents to abandon the authoritative status that they have previously ascribed to scripture.

While certainly not a new tactic when we consider contemporary definitions and understandings—and misunderstandings—of secularity, I find Vosper's assumption about private and public spaces and pure and tainted objects to be significant: in the private sphere we can be ourselves but in the public sphere we should be something other than ourselves; pure children and tainted bibles are too easily dressed up in the trappings of political rhetoric and therefore should not be admitted in to public debates regardless of how virtuous the motivation.
According to Keane, the Protestant communities in his study understand modernity as progressive and emancipatory. This representation of modernity, in many ways, stems from a merging of a modern conception of time as progress with eschatological concepts of time as divinely directed with a specific end (the apocalypse) in mind. I am arguing that the ultimate end for progressive Christians rests in something that resembles atheism. This possibility is revealed by the questions Cheryl asked: "Does anyone still believe in God?" and "who isn't ready to give up that image yet?" I am suggesting that, for progressive Christians, several tensions emerge around temporality placing them in a liminal state. They are frozen as sincere subjects between time as progress and eschatological time; between an inaccessible past (brought about by the inability to reconcile biblical criticism and the Christian narrative) and an absent future (in which Christian theological terms and constructs are necessarily expunged); between different definitions of what it means to believe and not believe (that is, where belief ends and atheism begins). With this in mind, I turn to an examination of how and why progressive Christians bring together modern and eschatological temporalities.

For the majority of North American Christians, eschatological temporality is based on their interpretations of the bible (see Bielo 2009a; Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000). As I will show the eschatological temporality for progressive Christians, likewise, emerges out of biblical interpretation but in a somewhat indirect way. For traditional and conservative Christians, the texts themselves are interpreted as possessing an eschatological nature (e.g. both the Hebrew bible and Christian scriptures have been read as interpreting the parousia, or 'end times'). For progressive Christians it is the process of interpretation, that is, biblical criticism, which leads them to reject eschatological teachings; but in doing so, I argue, they
adopt or retain the patterns of eschatological socio-temporal positioning in their conversations about an ethics of belief which culminates in atheism.

**Christian Eschatological Thinking**

Modern Christian eschatological thinking is rooted in an understanding of temporality and spatiality that is represented as distinctively linear and irreversible. According to the Christian master narrative, time has both a beginning (creation) and an end (apocalypse), each of which is controlled and directed by God. According to Pauline apocalyptic thinking, true believers will be separated from the rest of humanity at the end of time. In Euro-American Western Christian thought, each individual adherent is responsible for his or her actions.

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230 The following discussion is meant to be a brief overview, in order to position my use of the term in a larger discussion of both Christian and non-Christian representations of time and their development into contemporary thinking (see Boyer 1992; Moorhead 1999 for in depth discussions of conservative eschatological or apocalyptic thought).

There are several problems inherent in offering a 'normative' perspective of Christian eschatological or temporal thinking, especially given the fact that progressive Christians do not fall within—and indeed work hard to delineate themselves from—what we might term 'the norm'. However, I suggest that their attempts to differentiate themselves from the normative consensus warrants this discussion. Like Joel Robbins (2007), I see the benefit of discussing an "ideal-typical notion of Christianity," which resembles certain forms of conservative and evangelical Protestantism (2007: 10). In doing so, I take up Robbins' suggestion that once the model has been established the important task of exploring variation must be pursued (2007: 16-17). Progressive Christianity represents one such variation.

231 The idea that time moves forward is often assumed to be a universal concept. The universality of linear time has been challenged by anthropologists since Durkheim's work on aboriginal Australians. For example, a recent study by Aleksandar Janc and Clothilde Bullen (2003) revealed that Australian aboriginals understand time as multidimensional and inseparable (see also Deulke 2008). Likewise, Stefan F. Maul (2008) offers a convincing argument that in the ancient Near East, Akkadian sources reveal that Mesopotamians saw themselves as "backing into the future" in such a way that they moved through time with their focus on the past located in the distant past, not unlike the way that the future is consider in modern Western societies. Our modern conception of time is one that relates to specific understandings of historicity (Latour 1993: 68). Contemporary political depictions of time as linear emerges along with modern Western conceptions of 'the nation,' which provides an identity that is depicted as both rooted in the past and moving forward towards progress (see Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

232 This is why the evolution debate remains such a hot topic for conservative and fundamentalist Christians today. The questioning of God's exclusive role in creation implicitly threatens temporal assumptions concerning the incarnation and the apocalypse (see Bialecki 2009a: 111). Suggestions that creation occurred apart from the 'hand of God' challenges the likelihood that God will direct the end times. As many scholars of conservative and fundamentalist Christianity have shown (e.g. Frykholm 2004, Boyer 1992; Moorhead 1999) beliefs about the end time are directly related to the ways that contemporary Christians position themselves socially, economically and politically in the world (see Harding 1994).
her fate at the time of the final judgement. This individual responsibility is usually distinguished by a choice to internalize Christian teachings and theology. The process of internalization is depicted as a divinely mediated agency enacted cognitively by the individual believer. In this schema, actions taken in the present (e.g. the choice to "be a Christian," to be baptised, to believe) directly determine their place among the 'righteous' or the 'damned' at the end of time.

This is the standard or 'ideal-typical' contemporary evangelical Christian theological stance in which time is directed toward an eschatological end. This eschatological end presumes the possibility of a rupture or radical change from the past to the present and into the future. This understanding of time has led to the prominence of premillennial dispensationalism, in which adherents read current events through a prophetic lens directed towards the end times. Their conception of temporality results, according to Susan Harding (1994), not so much in a theology or set of beliefs, but rather in a narrative mode or a way of knowing history in which history is seen as progressing towards an ultimate end, the apocalypse (1994: 60). According to this reading of time and reality, the end of time has been divinely predetermined and is therefore assured. Actions and events in the contemporary world are undetermined, but everything will ultimately cumulate in, and indeed leads to, a specific end. As Harding explains, "Christians have no role in unfolding the events that bring about the millennium: nothing they (or anyone else) do can change the date of the Rapture,"

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233 As Joel Robbins (2007) explains the Jesus-experience as a "doctrine of radical discontinuity" has enabled the development of a conception of time that allows for ruptures. In many ways, discontinuity serves as the essential defining element of Christian belief, practice and identity; it is reinforced by doctrines such as the atonement of Jesus, the necessity of a conversion experience, the supersession of the "old" testament by the "new" and an eschatological or apocalyptic end in which the entire order of humanity will be reconstituted (see Robbins 2007: 11).

234 The Rapture is considered to be a miraculous event in which God will take up all 'true believers' into heaven before beginning a bloody and horrific battle with the anti-Christ on earth.
which only God knows, having set the date at the beginning of time" (61). In this scenario, premillennial dispensationalists understand themselves as lacking agency in the ultimate fate of humanity and the world. Robbins (2001) explains that dispensationalists understand themselves as "living in a gap between the narratives that make up sacred history and those that they have already been foretold as structuring the future" (543). As such, this theology provides a means of locating one's existence in the present that is fulfilled by the assurance of the (apocalyptic) future.

In contrast, in a post-millennial view of history humans act as agents in their ultimate destiny. This perspective is not as prominent among contemporary evangelicals but served as the foundational eschatological vision of the social gospel movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1907 the great social gospel thinker Walter Rauschenbusch wrote optimistically that the goal of a just society was imminent. He concludes his work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, by declaring that "generations yet unborn will mark this as a great day of the Lord for which the ages waited" (see Rauschenbusch 2007:339; cf. Evans 2010: 1). The social gospel movement advocated for 'social salvation' as the primary objective of Christianity. As such, the movement sought to achieve a balance between collective salvation (obtained by resolving socio-economic problems) and individual salvation (sought through traditionally evangelical conversion to Christianity). Adopting the rhetoric of progressivism, the social gospellers saw themselves as participating in and expanding the kingdom of God, as described in the Christian New Testament.\(^{235}\) In many

\(^{235}\) Ronald White and C. Howard Hopkins argue that the social gospel is better classified as a network, rather than a movement. While different segments within the social gospel existed, White and Hopkins point to an underlying optimism about the "ultimate goodness of America, despite their insistent cry of crisis" as a prominent theme. In regards to the future, White and Hopkins likewise identify a prevalent optimism about industrial developments and social sciences as tools for improving the conditions of human life (White and Hopkins 1976: xviii; for an in-depth discussion of the social gospel movement see Dorrien 1995; 2003; 2008; and King 1989).
ways, the social gospellers embraced a sense of time as progressive, which historians have argued was one of the core characteristics of the modern era. The conceptualization of time as progressive itself stems from Christian understandings of salvation and teleology, although it is just as likely to emerge from discourses of historicism and secularization in the contemporary world (see Kontler 2008). This understanding of the collective as a necessity for salvation is shared by progressive Christians. While a genealogical relationship should not be traced from nineteenth century social gospellers to the contemporary progressive Christian communities featured in this study, many of the beliefs and practices of the social gospel shaped the face of liberal Protestantism in Canada.

The progressive view of history positions progress as always in the future. Despite his assertion of the establishment of a "new apostolate," which would—like the original apostles—inaugurate the kingdom of God, Rauschenbusch noted that the new Christian era remains indefinitely in the imminent future:

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236 For contemporary liberal Protestants, a Christian understanding of time is balanced with modern Western temporal structures. The modern representation of time comes of age in what many following Hegel understand as a "historical consciousness." In the 19th century, history was understood as a means through which the present and the future could be interpreted. In religious thinking, the bible served as one of the core resources through which historical understanding was revealed (see for example Gauvreau 1991 for a discussion of interactions between theology and history). The understanding that history can be interpreted so as to make a path for the future is acknowledged as core to Christianity by Keane, who argues that history is understood by many within both Protestant and secular traditions as "a narrative of moral liberation" that contributes to a propensity for reform or revitalization movements (2007: 5-6).

237 Within the Canadian context, the social gospel movement led to an increased secular approach and a shift from theological representations of social salvation to sociological ones. Additionally, drawing from Christian socialism, those within the movement sought to create a new political union. As historian Ramsay Cook (1985) explained in his work on the nineteenth century English Canada: "The religious crisis provoked by Darwinian science and historical criticism of the bible led religious people to attempt to salvage Christianity by transforming it into an essentially social religion. The orthodox Christian preoccupation with salvation was replaced with social salvation; the traditional Christian emphasis on man's relationship with God shifted to a focus on man's relationship with man" (Cook 1985: 4). Cook's work focuses on the liberal Protestant promotion of secularisation, which occurred through an increased emphasis upon social utility and a minimizing emphasis upon doctrine and the institutional import of the church. Ultimately, according to Cook, attempts to make the church relevant—to bring it into conversation with current sociological, scientific and historical teachings in the nineteenth century—resulted in a decreased social relevancy for the church (1985: 5).
In asking for faith in the possibility of a new social order, we ask for no Utopian delusion. We know well that there is no perfection for man in this life: there is only growth toward perfect. . . . We make it a duty to seek what is unattainable. We have the same paradox in the perfectibility of society. We shall never abolish suffering. . . . At best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order. The kingdom of God is always but coming (Rauschenbusch 2007: 337-8).

Those in the social gospel movement understood temporality as suspended: always progressing but never realising its conclusion. Similarly, as Guyer explains in her examples of evangelical Christianity, a focus on the future results in a paralysis concerning matters in the present. This is, I argue, part of the temporal-orientation legacy taken up by the progressive Christian movement that likewise looks to a future-orientation in which justice becomes the focus of progressive Christian practices.238

In examining progressive Christians, I call for a nuanced comparison between modern constructions of linear temporality and millenarian time that, while linear, creates a potential space in which rupture could occur at any point by means of a divine directive. Linear adoptions by liberal Protestants emerge out of theological histories understanding the end times as a consequence of a post-millennial dispensationalist theology. These evangelical, or conservative, representations result in an orientation toward the future as determining the present. As such, events predicted to occur in the future (i.e. the apocalypse, the Rapture) play an important role in directing an adherent's actions in the present. Likewise, for liberal Protestants, investment in the future—i.e., the bringing about of the kingdom of God—requires that activities in the present be engaged with this end in mind.

As noted previously in Chapter Three, attention to history, and more importantly, a re-evaluation of history—in the form of an attempt to determine the practices and beliefs of

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238 Likewise, the civil rights movement was informed by a prophetic rhetoric (see Chappell 2004). Many members of the progressive Christian communities I have studied were themselves part of the civil rights movement: participating in protest marches and other cultural accruals of the 1960s and 1970s.
the early Christian community—serves as a primary location for the construction of progressive Christianity. Ultimately, this construction is necessarily filled with tension because, as Latour explains, the purification of the narrative automatically generates hybrids. For progressive Christians, access to the past is always read through the lens of interpretation and corruption, and, as such, remains inaccessible in its desired "authentic form."

Likewise, progressive Christians seek out elements in the Christian narrative which they determine to be corrupt and therefore inauthentic and attempt to replace these problematic elements with narratives and beliefs that more readily correspond to an empirical and liberal worldview. Theirs is a theology which they understand as constantly evolving, changing and transforming. It is a representation which itself, emerges from Christian tenets of self-transformation, rupture and collective identity construction (as I argued in Chapter Four).

As Robbins (2001) points out, Euro-American Western constructions of time—both scholarly and popular—have focused predominantly on continuity rather than on rupture, which he suggests is central to the Christian narrative (see Robbins 2007: 9; 2003). In the Christian narrative, 'rupture' takes many forms, but most importantly in terms of conversion and apocalypse, and as such becomes necessary to salvation. For progressive Christians, rupture occurs in the peeling back of the Christian narrative to uncover corruption on the part of clerical elites (Chapter Three) and culminates in the instance of 'deconversion' (Chapter Four). The uneasy tension between an inaccessible past and an unattainable future, in many

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239 Robbins argues that part of the hesitancy on the part of Western-trained anthropologists to study Christianity derives from their reluctance to allow for the radical break that Christian constructions of temporality assume. Rather anthropologists focus upon inherited tradition and cultural replication. What is true for the discipline of anthropology is likewise true for Western culture in general. While notions of rupture—i.e., conversion and apocalypse—are important components of conservative Christian or evangelical beliefs and practices, for many contemporary liberal Protestants, they are under-emphasised or explicitly rejected.
ways, places progressive Christians in a liminal state concerning their theological and ontological stance. This liminal status is derived from the adoption of two contrasting assumptions about time: time as progress (the perceived normative perspective of the modern, secular Euro-American West) and eschatological time (which informs the Christian narrative). These two different, yet related, conceptions of time serve to reinforce the emphasis on the distant future at the expense of agency in the immediate future. Returning to Guyer, agency takes on the form of justice or advocacy for justice in the contemporary world. In many ways, progressive Christianity represents a continuity of ruptures. In my next example, my interlocutor Jodi presumes the adoption of an atheistic worldview is inevitable but the continued presence of theists or pseudo-theists in her community suggests that this future aim may be ultimately unattainable. Jodi’s attempt to reconcile this tension in the moral or ethical realm is revealed through her use of singular and plural pronouns.

For many progressive Christians, an atheistic worldview allows for the creation of a space to enact such forms of justice. Jodi—who has at various points in her life adopted and then rejected an atheist standpoint, and currently considers herself an atheist who goes to an Anglican church—presents atheism as the means to justice. This potential for enacted justice is nuanced, for Jodi, by a need for the entire community (the collective) to adopt and share her theological perspective and beliefs before it can properly be achieved. Jodi explained to me that she is "more theologically advanced" than other members of her community:

I call myself an atheist to the Anglican Church. But when I get more specific, I say that I don't believe in anything that I can call God. I think we need to get rid of that word. It's a stumbling block.²⁴⁰ I mean, if I say I believe in God

²⁴⁰ The term "stumbling block" is one used frequently in conservative and evangelical traditions to refer to persons or activities that might lead one into sin. The origin of the term is biblical. In the book of Ezekiel, for example, idols are identified as "stumbling blocks" which condemn those who follow them (see Ezekiel 3:20, 14:3-7). In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter's attempt to rebuke Jesus' explanation of his impending crucifixion is identified as a "stumbling block" by Jesus (see Matthew 16:23). And in several of Paul's letters, he admonishes
people—that doesn't communicate to people what I want to communicate. It communicates to me the standard view of a God that fixes things. I don't really think there's anything in control of all this. I think that it's a mystery. I'm fine with mystery. And for a long time I have been, 'we don't know and we won't know'. I'm fine leaving it like that. So often, when people say they believe in God, then they will get busy telling you what God thinks and what God wants. I don't think we can say that. I don't think we can be so sure. I just think that we have a collective responsibility and as a people, as humanity, we can inspire each other to do good things and great things, instead of being disruptive. That power was in all of us, to do that. We don't need to rely on something external that is going to punish you if you don't and reward you if you do.

For Jodi then, belief in God is both uncertain and morally questionable because it gets in the way of what she imagines to be the more authentic goal of participating in a collective responsibility to inspire others to altruism. Within her community, Jodi understands herself as on the margins or the fringes in terms of her belief system. Her husband, for example, explained to me that "he was not as far along" as his wife, primarily because he "had not thought things through" as much as she had.

Throughout our conversation, Jodi expressed impatience towards the rest of her community who are not yet atheists, as well as those who desire to hear theistic language in the prayers. In many ways she positioned herself as a forerunner, or an early adopter, of sorts, to atheism. This self-depiction is especially interesting when examining her use of personal pronouns in the above quotation. Jodi begins by positioning herself as an atheist ("I call myself an atheist") and explaining her own disbelief in God ("I don't believe in . . . God"). She goes on to assert that the word should be jettisoned ("I think we need to get rid of that word") and that she is comfortable with such an act ("I'm fine leaving it like that"). Jodi's language here begins with the personal ('I') and then shifts to the inclusive ('we'). Once Jodi adopts the pronoun "we," she is able to speak about activities and events that are located in Christians to be careful that they do not themselves serve as a "stumbling block" to other believers or potential ones (see Romans 11:9 and 14:3; 1 Corinthians 1:23 and 8:8; and 2 Corinthians 6:3).
the ideal future. It can be argued that Jodi assumes that, were the entire community (the "we") to adopt her atheistic theology, the "collective responsibility" to "inspire each other to do good things,"—that is, "the power . . . in all of us"—would be achieved.

Of course Jodi's community has not whole-heartedly adopted an atheistic worldview. This observation is evidenced by those who "still believe" and "aren't ready to give up the mention of God in prayers." Those members who retain certain elements of Christian beliefs, practices and traditions anchor the community in the present, delaying the onset of the eschatological future in which all members of the community will espouse atheist beliefs, and an 'authentic' community focused upon collective inspiration and justice will be realised.

In the churches that I have studied, this tenuous space between believer and atheist creates a marker between an inner and outer circle of adherents. Even though many progressive Christians attend church services regularly, because of the presence of those few who "still believe," their religiosity is more prevalently enacted through participation in book study and discussion groups. The members of the reading and discussion groups often distinguish themselves from those in their churches who do not participate in the reading or discussion groups through their self-perception of being more theologically advanced. According to Jerry featured in my discussion of the theological studies group at George Street United Church in Chapter Two, other members of their church are criticised because they still need to "sing some of the hymns that we sing, [the ones] that really give you the yippies."241 Likewise, those in the reading and discussion groups continue to participate in traditional rituals and use traditional liturgies in worship. Jerry understands the church as fulfilling a role for those who "are very happy with their faith and the stories in the bible" but

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241 The context of our conversation and Jerry's tone suggests that "yippies" is a repulsive rather than pleasurable experience. I interpreted his use of this term as an alternate expression of the uncomfortable nervousness associated with "heebie-jeebies."
he is grateful for others, like himself, "who are really restless." Jerry expounded that he still finds the service to be meaningful but that he is forced to "turn off stuff that I don't relate to."

The progressive Christians who continue to attend more liturgically traditional churches do so because they believe that the rest of the church will eventually embrace their perspective. In the meantime, the book study and discussion groups provide a venue in which they can practice their religious commitments in a way that they view as more authentic.

The practice of rejecting a traditional narrative in favour of another, regardless of the consistency of the new version, is an important element of progressive Christianity. The act of rejecting and identifying oneself in opposition to a normative version of Christianity, which progressive Christians perceive as concretely established by evangelicals, has become an important component in the construction of a progressive Christian imagined community. As noted above, many progressive Christians understand their theology as one that is in a continuous state of transformation; indeed this is considered the point rather than an anomaly. In fact, even amongst progressive Christian communities there is discrepancy between what theological and ritualistic constructs should be included or rejected. Other churches I have studied consider West Hill United Church—whose reading group I describe at the beginning of this chapter, and of which both Suzan and Stewart are members—to be the most extreme. On more than one occasion in interviews and in group discussions, individuals at these other churches have indicated that individually and collectively they are not as far along as Vosper or West Hill. Moreover, in some cases, traditional theological language still resonates with them; or they admit that they aren't ready to give up certain symbols or rituals yet. While certain progressive communities are identified as further along than others in this "evolutionary process," they are all more or less considered by those
within the progressive Christian community to be heading in the same direction, which they perceive to be on a forward-oriented path towards ultimately abandoning their Christianity in favour of an atheistic theology.

In arguing that progressive Christians are paralysed in the present, I am suggesting that the past and the future play off of each other as primary venues against which their present understanding of progressive Christianity is constructed and realized. Progressive Christian interests in language and belief mean that performative statements of belief are debated and analysed relentlessly within the communities I have studied. One of the primary concerns for many progressive Christians has been the recitation of creeds and statements of belief, as well as the phraseology of songs. In the final section of this chapter, I connect the ethics and morality of belief within a progressive Christian worldview to assumptions about what I have identified as an eschatological temporality.

**Sing (or Speak) a New Song unto the Lord**

In returning to notions of sincerity, integrity and earnestness, it is helpful to examine the ways in which progressive Christians encounter liturgical statements and doctrinal creeds. In order to promote an evolving theology, many progressive churches have rewritten prayers and hymns in such a way that they exclude patriarchal language, atonement theology or references to Jesus and God. Prayers, religious songs and creeds are usually understood as reflections of group ideology serving as an "observable domain of religious practice" (Shoaps 2002: 34), and have traditionally been used by religious communities as a means of regulating beliefs. When the entire community continuously recites the same statements of belief, one may assume that the community shares a common theology and worldview.
However, as Keane (2007) has argued, spontaneity is often the approach to prayers most preferred by Protestants. In Keane’s study, spontaneity is intimately linked to conceptions of sincerity and derived from an attempt to access a 'pure' expression of verbal interactions with the divine.  

For many progressive Christians, traditional prayers, hymns and creeds are "no longer" representative of their belief systems and have been altered accordingly. At West Hill United Church, for example, in place of the Lord's Prayer, the children lead the congregation in a revised version of the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. Other congregations have substituted the word "mother" for "father" in prayer. Most have eliminated the creeds and any prayer or song making reference to a relational deity. For instance, Holy Cross Lutheran Church retains its liturgical frame but, each week, Pastor Dawn reworks the language in

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242 Rather than reciting a prescribed prayer the adherent speaks "honestly" and "from the heart." Keane shows that this drive can be traced to the seventeenth century Puritans and their contemporaries in the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge (founded in 1660), who likewise sought transparent language purported to express the objective perspective of the speaker and nothing more (Keane 2007: 199; see also Latour 1993: 24).

243 Note that the prayer focuses upon the active agency and expectations of the personal character of the individual. This structure stands in contrast to the traditional Prayer of St. Francis, which begins with a request to God that the supplicant be "a channel of [the Lord's] peace." West Hill United Church has amended the prayer on several occasions. Here is a copy taken from the church bulletin from Sunday, February 1st, 2009:

**Children's Prayer**

As I live every day,
I want to be a channel for peace.
May I bring love where there is hatred
and healing where there is hurt,
joy where there is sadness
and hope where there is fear.
I pray that I may always try
to understand and comfort other people
as well as seeking comfort and understanding
from them.
Wherever possible, may I choose to be
a light in the darkness,
a help in times of need,
and a caring, honest friend,
And may justice, kindness, and peace
slow from my heart forever,
Amen
order to accurately reflect the developing theology of the congregation. As one congregant, a retired Lutheran pastor himself, explained to me:

The pastor wears vestments, there is an altar, there is a baptismal font, there is liturgy. I think the liturgy follows the traditional form of Lutheran liturgy. But the pastor rewrites everything [so] that [it] is beyond inclusive; it's inclusive-inclusive! That's not typical. Most people would not put the time and energy in that she does; they would just accept the book as the book. . . . But Dawn goes beyond that and cleans up the language even more, so in that sense it would be untypical.

At Holy Cross Lutheran Church, the spoken word occupies the primary space. Christian practice and church accessories are subordinate to belief and verbal expressions of faith. This structure means that traditional frameworks of the liturgy can be maintained because they are interpreted as the most significant component, where the real power lies. In other words, the vestments, the altar and the font are subordinate to the liturgy, and as such it is the liturgy to which pastor Dawn turns her attention in order to assure that it corresponds with the identified beliefs of the community (in this instance, the emphasis is on ensuring that the wording is inclusive).

Likewise, in my conversation with Judith, the Presbyterian who had just recently returned to church (see Chapter 3), she explained that while she values tradition, one of the first steps in articulating a progressive Christian theology is the rewriting of traditional prayers so that they correspond to a more liberal worldview. This practice is done with the understanding that the revision may be further amended at any time:

There are very few times in our daily lives that we join with other people to participate and experience exactly the same thing. The caution would be: Let's understand what we're saying and let's understand why we're saying it. So, let's not just say the Lord's Prayer because the Lord's Prayer has been said since the beginning of time. Let's have a study group on the Lord's Prayer. Let's figure out what it means for us. So when we're saying, "our Father who art in heaven," what do we mean by that? And what does it mean for us? And maybe we've decided we can't say, "our Father who art in heaven." Maybe we
have to say, "The divine presence which is all around us and in us." These are things that need to be decided and discussed. While we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater, we have to examine everything that we're doing to see whether it fits with our current understanding of the world. . . . Twenty-five years from now the people may be saying: "Why are we saying, 'the divine presence that is around us all?' That's ridiculous! What are we trying to say here? We're trying to say that we're all connected." They'll create some other saying that gets that across.

While the prayer itself is seen as potentially fluid, it is meant to reflect, in this instance, the actual beliefs and worldview of the community. In this instance, it is not desirable for Judith to maintain a connection to the past through words, only to the future. What is most interesting is that while the communities I study do not retain the traditional prayers or creeds of the Christian tradition (e.g. the Apostles Creed), they retain their perceived function. As Keane (2007) explains, "the impact of the creed as a paradigm lies, in part, in the more ordinary domain of semiotic practices" (2007: 70). More specifically, the creeds retain their function as performative statements of assent. In examining the Apostle's Creed, Keane points out that the creed involves propositional phrases ("I believe . . ."), and subsequently appears to place the speaker "in an exterior third-person relationship to her own beliefs, as that of a subject to an object world" (2007: 71). I have not encountered any creedal statements focusing on the first person singular in the progressive Christian communities that I have studied.²⁴⁴ Some begin with statements such as "we believe" but others attempt to depart from statements or assumptions of belief altogether and instead focus on a desire for cohesion within the community, or within the world in general.

When Judith imagines her church in the future, she imagines that they will struggle with the new version of the Lord's Prayer for precisely the same reasons that she does. Judith posits that the church of the future will understand prayers and creeds as performative

²⁴⁴ Although in the previous footnote, the Children's Prayer does use the first person singular.
statements of assent and that, like she herself, they will construe the recitation of creeds or prayers as an ethical or moral act. Judith's two-part process of studying a practice and then articulating a new approach that rejects a previously determined stance is a common one within progressive Christian communities.245

While some progressive communities rarely read the bible during church services and the book study groups prefer to engage with more secularly-oriented texts, other progressive Christian reading groups maintain a closer connection to theological and biblical themes. As noted above, these groups often identify some progressive Christians as having "gone too far" or indicate that they are "not willing to give up" certain elements of the Christian tradition. As one man, Stephen, half-jokingly explained to me: "I understand that the miraculous birth of Jesus didn't happen—there was no Bethlehem, no stables, no Wiseman, no shepherds-watch-their-flocks-by-night, no heavenly chorus of angels—but can I at least keep the camels?"

As already noted, a rupture was created in West Hill United Church when several members opted to transfer their memberships to another local United Church because they felt that the community had "gone too far" in its rejection of traditional Christian practices and language. In chapter four, I explained how Hedy was confused by the decision of the members who left West Hill United Church over the use of language because she does not comprehend their inability to understand why she is unable to sing certain hymns or recite certain creeds. Disagreements over the integrity of language have led to a split in the community. Hedy is unable to reconcile her beliefs with traditional language to the point that she is unable to share a common worship space with individuals who use the language of traditional prayers, hymns and creeds.

245 See, for example, my discussion of rewriting the ten commandments in Chapter Three of this dissertation.
Later in my conversation with Hedy, she outlined that she "still" enjoys traditional hymns but feels that they have no place in a church service: "If I want to sing the old hymns? If I want to sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'? I can do it when I'm trampling up and down the street because it's got a good [beat]—I like the music when I'm walking." For Hedy, and other progressive Christians, this song is a problem because it is seen as supporting an imperial or colonial project of forced conversion of other cultures to Christianity. While the song has a place in Hedy's memory as one which she grew up singing and resonated with her during World War II, when she served in the Air Force, she is clear that it can no longer be admissible within a Christian liturgical or worship setting. Like the bible, which is rarely read at West Hill United Church because the community is trying to provide space for other texts and other voices, the song is relegated to either the private sphere or the past. Many in this community admitted to me that they would accept individuals who still read the bible at home but that they think it is unfair to allocate it to such a prominent place within the church.

In many ways progressive Christians understand their church as a public space that is temporally oriented towards the future. When discussing their theology, progressive Christians emphasize the collective in establishing a community that is inclusive and hospitable. There is a clear divide between the collective space of the community and the private space of the individual adherents' beliefs, practices and opinions. Texts, traditions and doctrines from the past are debated, amended and rejected in the collective space whereas individuals admit to me that they "still" hold on to certain traditions such as reading the bible or singing the old hymns in the private sphere—a point that raises the question in which space are they really being "authentic?"
Two weeks before her ninetieth birthday, Hedy revealed that she often contemplates her death and plans for her funeral. Since Hedy does not believe in an afterlife, she does not want a traditional funeral, which she views as overly ritualistic, but she does want some sort of memorial service for her friends: "I have a favourite psalm, [or] hymn, that I have said I want sung at my funeral. Well, I don't want a funeral because there is not going to be anybody here, but I would like people to get together and have a good time." When I asked her what the song is, she cannot remember at first, but then she begins to hum, and I identify it as 'On Eagles' Wings', a popular funeral song in liberal Christian communities.

The song is not overly theistic in that it does not presume doctrines of substitutionary or sacrificial atonement, born again experiences, or other tenets held by more conservative Christians. It does, however, suggest a relational and interventionalist deity upon which humanity is entirely reliant for protection. The song posits a relationship of dependence between God and the adherent in which the believer is assured that she will be made "to shine like the sun" and held "in the palm of His Hand" in exchange for a declaration of faith.

246 Hedy's reference to the fact that there will not "be anybody here" is in relation to the fact that she does not believe in life after death; she does not want a traditional funeral in which the person who has died is ritualistically transitioned to the afterlife.

247 'On Eagles' Wings' was written in 1979 by liturgical theologian Fr. Michael Joncas, a Catholic Priest. The lyrics are based roughly on Psalm 91 and Isaiah 40:31. The song is a popular funeral song in Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant and evangelical communities. It is notable for having been performed at many of the funerals and memorial services for the victims of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Original Lyrics:

[Verse 1]: You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord/Who abide in His shadow for life/Say to the Lord, "My Refuge/My Rock in Whom I trust."
[Chorus]: And He will raise you up on eagle's wings/Bear you on the breath of dawn/Make you to shine like the sun/And hold you in the palm of His Hand.
[Verse 2]: The snare of the fowler will never capture you/And famine will bring you no fear;/Under His Wings your refuge/His faithfulness your shield.
[Repeat Chorus]
[Verse 3]: You need not fear the terror of the night/Nor the arrow that flies by day/Though thousands fall about you/Near you it shall not come.
[Repeat Chorus]
[Verse 4]: For to His angels He's given a command/To guard you in all of your ways/Upon their hands they will bear you up/Lest you dash your foot against a stone.
("Say to the Lord, "My Refuge, My Rock in Whom I trust."). As such, the underlying theology of this song is not unlike that which caused the rift in the church through which Hedy lost friendships. Hedy's discussion of her funeral, her potentially imminent death and her disbelief in life-after-death points to themes I encountered frequently in my interviews and discussions with progressive Christians. For the most part I found that the progressive Christians featured in this study were ambiguous—although not anxious—about death and dying. 

Conclusion

"Once they have dispersed, what such modern, yet closed communities leave behind them is not the past, but the future." 

Progressive Christians, as their name suggests, see themselves as progressing forward, yet they do so with a twofold gaze that focuses on both the past and the future. Not only do they look towards the future and the past but they are also suspended in the present as theirs is a gaze that is likewise fixed on the activities and presence of their Protestant proximate other. In many ways, this gaze holds them in tension between the past and the future, between devotion and atheism and also between private and public spaces. The continual examination and rewriting of performative statements—doctrines, creeds, hymns, etc.—mirrors their approach to the biblical text itself. The inability of progressive Christians

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248 Spong's publication *Eternal Life: A New Vision – Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell* (2009) is an exception and addresses questions concerning what happens after death. Despite the fact that Spong visited Holy Cross Lutheran Church in 2010 and spent a weekend lecturing on the material from this book, few members of that congregation and no one in any of the other congregations I studied, had read this book. Several confided to me that they found Spong's work on this topic to be difficult to follow and not relevant to their day-to-day lives. One member reported that he found the text—despite the fact that it claims to move "beyond theism"—to be too theistic in its understanding of life and death.

249 This quote comes from Boris Groys' article "Back to the Future," in which he outlines the ways in which contemporary post-communist artistic movements in Eastern Europe seek—not unlike progressive Christians—to delineate the identity of an Other (Groys 2003: 327).
to access what they identify as the "authentic" biblical narrative (see Chapter Three) resembles their inability to access a desired end of Christian beliefs. While progressive Christians point towards atheism as their ultimate end and some members of their communities have assumed this viewpoint—like Suzan, Stewart and Jodi—other members contemplate Cheryl's question: "Who isn't ready to give that up yet?" and "who still feels the need to believe in God?"

The hesitation and recognition that theology will be continuously overturned is important to the progressive Christian community. Their narrative is always unfinished. Just as Judith believes that ultimately the "divine presence that is around us all" will be rejected by future generations, so too the discussion group deemed the possibility of 'share' as a commandment to be too ambiguous and open to misinterpretation. The former members of Hedy's congregation departed because of the absence of certain prayers and songs, but Stephen accepts that his days of celebrating Christmas with a traditional nativity scene are numbered. In each instance progressive Christians point to an ethical imperative that drives their theology: Hedy cannot sing the songs or recite the creeds because they are no longer reflective of reality; Stephen will "give up" the nativity because it is not historically accurate, anymore.

The progressive Christian use of specific terms such as 'believers in exile', 'intellectual integrity' and 'Church Alumni Association', as well as their understanding of their theology as observably developing and progressing forward—as is evident in statements such as "does anyone still believe in God?" and "can I at least keep the camels?"—provides an important means by which they situate themselves within an imagined community. Furthermore, these signifying terms and temporal positions provide a means of representing
themselves in relation to the Protestant proximate other—evangelical, conservative and traditional forms of Christianity—as both Christian and atheist. This process is one that is so informed by a rejection of this Other that it is simultaneously encompassed by it. Unconsciously, progressive Christians have adopted the eschatologically-oriented temporal position of their Protestant proximate other and its ensuing cognitive frameworks. As such, they remain rhetorically suspended in a belief system in which they "still hold certain traditional tenets," "have already given up other beliefs" and are "not quite ready to give up particular key components of the Christian narrative, not yet."

And perhaps not ever.
On April 9, 2010, I attended my last book study session at West Hill United Church. It was the week after Easter and an unusual heat wave had hit most of Southern Ontario the previous week. Something about the rapid transition from winter to summer weather felt awry; the requisite anticipation that accompanies the spring season had passed us by, and there was a sense that we had already transitioned into the lazy glut of summer. As I entered the church and quickly made my way into the lounge, which as always was arranged in a circle of forty or so chairs, I could feel the excited tension in the air. Several members of the church were eagerly clutching potential books for next year's book study, and one member in particular, Jon, had an armful of prospective texts. This night was much anticipated because tonight the members of this year's book study would choose next year's study text. Having been present for this session the previous year (in 2009), I was excited to see what the evening's events would bring. The previous year had consisted of multiple rounds of voting, ardent defenses of certain books, impassioned speeches and jabs at each other's literary expertise and choices—this night was a night unlike the others for the book study group.

I knew better than to join in the actual voting and debate this year. At last year's session, fearing that I would not be present for the 2010 book study, one of the members had tried to have my votes stricken from the record. It was only after I swore up and down that I would indeed be present for the 2010 book study that I was allowed to continue participating in the voting procedure (I should note that her objections were all for naught, as neither her favourite nor my own were the final selection for the 2010 book study). Reflecting upon this small event in the context of this dissertation, her objections—which at the time seemed
offensive, since no one else participating in the vote was asked to commit to attending the book study scheduled for nine months later—reflect larger concerns around intellectual integrity and group membership that animate progressive Christianity. The notion that one's words (in this case, my vote) and one's actions (participation in the book study) must align is applicable to membership in the book study itself. This point supports my claim that book study and discussion groups are a central space for the formation of progressive Christianity.

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to reveal to my readers the diversity of the theological and social worlds inhabited by the progressive Christians featured in this dissertation. I have argued that amid the longstanding debates over serious theological and ontological positions, equally important to the construction of a progressive Christianity are seemingly mundane or worldly concerns. Thus, difficult theological questions stand side-by-side with the seemingly mundane. For instance, a progressive Christian might ask the following theological questions: Should one adopt a theistic, non-theistic or atheistic view of God? What do the words used in liturgy, music and prayer reveal about a community's ethical stance? What is the place of bible reading in postcolonial contexts? These theological questions often are accompanied by less weighty queries such as: Should we open a bottle of wine with lunch? Who will connect with questions about pez dispensers and female singing sensations in a friendly get-to-know you ice breaker? What books should be chosen to study and discuss? It has been my intention to animate the stories and the worlds of the progressive Christians featured in this dissertation in such a way that its readers might feel as though they themselves sat amid the discussions and the debates. With this in mind, in my conclusion, I turn to the debate concerning what to read at book study, since the selection of the text is interpreted as one of the most important indicators of the direction the church is moving.

"This is the only time we ever come to fists at book study," she began, smiling widely. With that Suzan explained the format for the evening. Each person who had brought a book for consideration would be given a few minutes to plead their case and extol the virtues of his or her suggested text. After a period of discussion and debate we took a snack break and then the voting began. The voting process was comprised of several rounds, after each of which those texts that did not receive enough votes were eliminated until a winner was finally declared. During the first round of voting we were asked to rank our first, second and third choice (an individual's first choice would receive a total of three votes, the second would receive two votes and the third choice would receive one vote). In the second round we voted for our first and second choice and in the final round we would vote only for our first choice. After explaining the logistics, Suzan looked around and asked, "Does anyone have any questions?"

The majority of the people in the room shook their heads, indicating that they were ready to commence the first round of presentations, debates and voting.
"Wait a minute," Kevin interrupted. "I think we should take a step back and discuss some of the larger issues that affect the book study. I want to talk about where we are in the evolution of the book study."

A number of people leaned forward in their seats and shifted their bodies to face Kevin more directly. Within this community, Kevin is well-known as a person who takes time to reflect and consider things that others might overlook. In Chapter Three, I described how Kevin objected to the suggestion of 'Share' because it was not clear enough to be included in the truncated six commandments. While he sometimes calls for pause on issues or concerns that others might view as trivial, his practice of doing so is highly respected by the community at West Hill United Church. Kevin and his wife regularly lead services at West Hill and are both members of various boards and committees at the church. It is safe to say that Kevin's reflexive nature has by and large benefited the church.

"Was John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* the right kind of book for us?" Kevin asked, referring to the most recently studied text. Kevin's question was a good one. On more than one occasion the members of the book study had complained both publicly and privately that the text had been too difficult. Many arrived to book study, week after week, having not bothered to read the book at all, or having started the week's assigned selection only to give up midway through. Others complained that Saul's text, which is a historical and political commentary on the construction of Canadian identity, was too far removed from the interests and knowledge base of a church book study group.

Summarizing these and other concerns Kevin judiciously continued, "*A Fair Country* was a very political book which to me was very relevant, but five, six, seven years ago we
would have had a very different type of book. We would have chosen a "faith journey" type book. So is this where we want to go?"

Kevin's wife, Nancy, jumped in. "I found the book hard to get into. As it went along it became more relevant, I struggled with the first half and then gradually it became easier."

A number of heads, nodded in agreement. Suzan, however, disagreed. "I found the first part better because I enjoyed the history which I was familiar with."

*A Fair Country* is divided into four sections, which can be read as standalone essays. In the first part, "A Métis Civilization," Saul argues that while Canadian culture often locates its roots in a European and Judeo-Christian worldview it should see itself as drawing most strongly on its First Nations heritage. Canada's core value, multiculturalism, which is often thought to have been integrated into Canadian public policy by the Trudeau government in the late 1960s through to the early 1980s, was actually at the heart of First Nations ideologies well before contact with Europeans, according to Saul. In many ways, the tactics adopted by Saul are not dissimilar from those employed by the popular theologians read by progressive Christians. For example, Saul's second essay continues to probe the theme about confusion around Canadian identity by arguing that a misstep occurred when the British North America Act's defining phrase—peace, order and good government—was coined. Some law makers had desired an alternate phrase "peace, fairness, and good government," a wording which Saul argues more accurately reflects Canadian values. This explanation that an incorrect step or misinterpretation was pursued somewhere along the line is strikingly similar to some of the arguments put forward by authors like Borg, Crossan and Spong, for whom determining the historical accuracy of certain tenets and traditions is the first step in offering an alternative reading or ideology. The third section, which Nancy found more accessible but
others found less interesting, delineates Saul's critique of the actions taken by certain public and elite figures in Canada. Saul maintains that business leaders and politicians have failed the country by not thinking creatively and not standing up against injustice. The final section of the book summarizes and synthesizes the previous three essays.

Picking up on Kevin's point, Jon returned to the question of the direction of the book study and the perceived problem with people not reading the assigned book study texts. "I've been giving thought to Kevin's point. There were several times I heard people say they hadn't read the chapter." Recalling the book study of Gretta Vosper's *With Or Without God*, which occurred in the fall of 2008, Jon continued: "When we read Gretta's book, everyone read it. The conversation was really active and exciting. People aren't doing the readings now. I don't want people to not do the readings or to feel like it's a pain. We need to choose a book that is meaningful. One that people want to read."

"That's right," another woman chimed in. "We are a book club! We are readers!"

Nodding in agreement, Kevin, returned to Jon's point. "I want a book that is accessible and also represents something that we are passionate about."

As a book club it is expected that the members of the book club will be passionate about reading. This passion hit its maximum potential when one of their own—Vosper—actually wrote a book. In many ways, Vosper's book was received by the community as *theirs*: something that they could lay claim to and something that they could boast about in the larger progressive Christian community. Jon's memory of the book study in which they group read Vosper's book is similar to what I recorded in my field notes. In comparison to the 2010 book study, I found the group's reading of Vosper's text in 2008 to be far more closely engaged with the arguments and ideas presented within the text. The group eagerly
worked through the extensive study guide that had been prepared by one of the members of the congregation and seamlessly tied their own personal narratives to the arguments that Vosper raised in *With or Without God*.

In contrast, Saul's florid style of writing and unfamiliar terminology in *A Fair Country* proved to be too much for several members. At this point in our conversation a couple of different members interjected that they too desired something more accessible.

One woman, Audrey, explained, "I found it hard to read. I had to look up terms which was difficult [to do]. Vocab-wise and idea-wise it was slow. You had to stop reading and think. I didn't read all of the book, but I'll get to it this summer."

Following a similar vein of thought, Caroline, a younger woman in her mid-forties, agreed that she too had not read most of the book. "I want a book that I can just skim through but I'm also looking for a book that will challenge me. I enjoyed the discussion even having not read the book."

"There is a false dichotomy in the air," Jon interjected, "that there are hard to read books that are meaningful and easy ones that are not [meaningful]."

A chorus of "no's" resounded in response to Jon's suggestion, but he continued, "we want a book that reads easily and is challenging."

Another man, Pat, offered the following option: "The history and politics are very important to me. I had two books that I had thought about bring tonight. One was small, based on a true story, but it didn't have anything to do with religion so I didn't bring it. I also had a friend who used it for a different book study and he said it didn't work for his group."

"What was the book?" a couple of members inquired.

"Tuesdays with Morrie."
A chorus of "I love that book!" and "that's a great one!" was repeated throughout the room.

Pat then made a case for his second suggestion, "the other was a trilogy, the Vatican Trilogy. But it's about Catholics, uh-oh, who wants to read about that here?"

A couple of members of the book study group smiled and chuckled.

Trying to return the conversation to the question of the direction of the book study, Jon summarized the key points. "It sounds like we are saying that this last book wasn't a success—there were people who didn't read it."

Suzan immediately challenged Jon's assertion. "I don't think we can say whether someone read the book is a measure of success," she argued.

Offering an alternative way of evaluating success, Kevin proposed that the measure should be whether or not the group felt challenged by the text. A number of other members agreed with this qualification, and the conversation turned to the ways in which the text affected them as a church book study group.

"The question is, Caroline proposed, "what are we wrestling with? The roots of our faith?"

Picking up on Caroline's point another woman agreed. "I'd like to think about what we could look at that might revive the church. People are leaving the church. We should be thinking about what will bring them back."

"Through the book study?" Pat asked.

"Yes," the woman continued. "How can the book help us revive the church?"
Throughout the conversation, I had been scribbling rapidly in my field journal. Taking note of my extensive note-taking, Kevin directed the room to my presence and my dissertation research.

"Let's say that Rebekka's project is about the way that the book study at West Hill leads the way. The latest thing we cared about was food." Kevin is referring here to the book study in 2007 that looked at *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (2006). After reading that book, the church adopted new food practices and encouraged members of the congregation to eat local and fair trade products. Additionally, the church began to offer vegetarian cooking classes in order to encourage members to decrease their meat consumption. In my interviews with the members of the West Hill United Church book study group many identified the local diet study to be one of the most meaningful and relevant to the community as a whole.

"Are we still looking for that kind of book?" Kevin asked. "West Hill is progressing as a community and as a church group. We need to ask ourselves whether the book study is related to our progress as a community in the church? I would like to establish whether this is the ground rule of what we study." Kevin's reference here is to the fact that book study believes that they are in part responsible for shaping the direction of the church as a whole.

A moment of silence ensued, and looking puzzled, Caroline responded to Kevin's question. "The only requirement is 'no fiction'. We tried that and it didn't really work in our format because the chapters didn't stand alone."

Offering an interpretation of Kevin's question, another member explained, "We have a core group who come every year. But there are some people who come because of the book. This year, some people didn't come because the book was political."
Jon interjected and once again offered his interpretation of Kevin's point. "Each person is able to stretch the group," Jon pointed out.

Audrey agreed and described how at times she felt as if she was 'stretched' in unexpected ways. "Each book has an 'ah-ha' moment. It flips a switch and then something changes my way of thinking. Sometimes it comes out of the discussion and not the book itself. It just needs one thing and then everything is different."

Seeing this moment as her opportunity to redirect the group back to the assigned task for the evening, Suzan took the floor and pointed out that the group is limited by what people suggest. "I've found year after year, that if the choice is one of the books that I didn't recommend that I never would have read the book. I would have missed it," she concluded. And with that Suzan directed our attention to the task at hand and asked each member who had brought a potential text to take a turn describing their proposed books.

Since Jon had so many texts Suzan asked him to go first. Jon began by describing his admiration for Chris Hedges and offering a brief biography of Hedges' career. He outlined the three Hedges' texts and gave a brief synopsis of each book. Concerning American Fascists, Hedges' book outlining the politics of the Christian Right in America, he asserted, "I think it's important to know what the enemy is up to. You want to know what is going on in the name of Christianity" without pause he hastily adds, "some of us are innocent to all that."

Despite Jon's enthusiasm for Hedges, it is his other suggestion, Small Wonder by Barbara Kingsolver, that generates the most discussion. Again, Jon is enthusiastic about this option. He explains that Kingsolver's book is a collection of about 20 short essays, a number of which are about nature. Part of the appeal of Kingsolver's book for Jon is that he sees her
as a non-celebrity, someone to whom he and the other members of the book study can relate.

As evidence, Jon turns to the second chapter of the book and reads the first two paragraphs from a selection titled "Lily's Chickens."

My daughter is in love. She's only five years old, but this is real. Her beau is shorter than she is, by a wide margin, and she couldn't care less. He has dark eyes, a loud voice, and a tendency to crow. He also has five girlfriends, but Lily doesn't care about that, either. She loves them all: Mr. Doodle, Jess, Bess, Mrs. Zebra, Pixie and Kiwi. They're chickens. Lily likes to sit on an overturned bucket and sing to them in the afternoons. She has them eating out of her hand.

It began with coveting our neighbor's chickens. Lily would volunteer to collect the eggs, and then she offered to move in with them. Not the neighbors, the chickens. She said if she could have some of her own, she would be the happiest girl on earth. What parent could resist this bait? Our life style could accommodate a laying flock; my husband and I had kept poultry before, so we knew it was a project we could manage, and a responsibility Lily could handle largely by herself. I understood how much that meant to her when I heard her tell her grandmother, "They're going to be just my chickens, Grandma. Not even one of them will be my sister's." To be five years old and have some other life form entirely under your control—not counting goldfish or parents—is a majestic state of affairs (Kingsolver 2002: 109-110).

"How would that work with using that book as a study?" Kevin asked when Jon was finished reading.

"Each chapter is discrete," Jon replied. "I'm not sure this is the best for the discussion group, but I think everybody would get a lot out of this book."

"I could see us relating it to our lives," Suzan agreed as she smiled enthusiastically. "There are a lot of groups that prefer fiction," she continues. Returning to the earlier question about the purpose of the book she amends here comment, "this group needs a question, a problem to wrestle with. It isn't a problem to deal with beautiful literature; it just isn't the habit of this group." Having drawn this conclusion, Suzan invites other members to offer their proposed texts.
Next Nancy suggested Thomas Lippman's *Understanding Islam*. Her logic is similar to that of Jon in that she thinks that it is important for progressives to study and understand Islam precisely because she says that it is the fastest growing religion in the world (and Canada). A point which while not exactly correct, is nonetheless applicable to the demographics in Scarborough where West Hill is located. Caroline follows and recommends two options, both of which are by journalist and activist Raj Patel. Next in line is Suzan's suggestion, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression of Women into Opportunity* (2009) by husband and wife Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. Describing this book, Suzan describes the book as both hopeful and heart-breaking as it outlines the many challenges faced by women in the developing world, such as sexual slavery, rape and war. The book includes personal stories of women overcoming these and other forms of oppression and argues that providing women access to ever important resources will change the world. "I think there would be a lot of head nodding but I think there would be a lot of head scratching too," Suzan explains in her justification for this text.

After Suzan, another member offered Greg Mortonson's extremely popular books *Three Cups of Tea* (2007) and its sequel, *Stones into Schools* (2009), which build upon similar themes as Suzan's recommendation in advocating for education and humanitarian initiatives in the developing world. This suggestion was not a popular choice (see Table 1 below), primarily because a number of the book study group members already had read one or both of these texts. The final suggestion, which was equally unpopular, was to simultaneously read two books—one fiction and one non-fiction—that dealt with the same topic. These two books, Giles Milton's *Paradise Lost, Smyrna 1922* (2008) and Louis de Bernières' *Birds Without Wings* (2004), portray life in Turkey following the first world war.
This response did not garner a lot of response, perhaps, in part, due to the fact that the group had disliked the historical dimensions of their previous study book.

After each member had their turn speaking in favour of their proposed texts, we took a short snack break and then returned to the lounge to vote. The titles of each of the texts were written on a flip chart and number and pieces of paper were distributed. The members of the group were asked to write the assigned number of their first, second and third choices on ballots, which I volunteered to distribute and collect, since I had already stated that I would not be participating in the actual vote. There were a total of three rounds of voting and the results of each vote are provided in the table below (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Votes</th>
<th>Author/Title</th>
<th>Suggested by</th>
<th>Round 1</th>
<th>Round 2</th>
<th>Round 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chris Hedges' <em>War Is a Force that Give Us Meaning</em></td>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chris Hedges' <em>American Fascists</em></td>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chris Hedges' <em>The Empire of Illusion</em></td>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Barbara Kingsolver's <em>Small Wonder</em></td>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thomas Lippman's <em>Understanding Islam</em></td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Raj Patel's <em>Stuffed and Starved</em></td>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Raj Patel's <em>The Value of Nothing</em></td>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's <em>Half the Sky</em></td>
<td>Suzan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Greg Mortonson's <em>Three Cups of Tea AND Stones into Schools</em></td>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Giles Milton's <em>Paradise Lost AND Louis de Bernière's Birds Without Wings</em></td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it did not win the majority, Jon's suggestion of *Small Wonder* eventually won the runoff vote and was selected as the group's choice for 2011.

I was surprised by the group's selection and suspect that the reader of this dissertation might be as well. A close reader of my fourth chapter would probably assume—as I did—
that the group would select one of Hedges' books, particularly one that focuses on the
problem of political engagement on the part of the Christian Right. That being said, the group
had read one of Hedges' books, *I Don't Believe in Atheists* (2008), two years prior and had
found his portrayal of liberal Christianity to be condescending and unfair. For example in the
introduction to *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, Hedges writes:

> The liberal church, attached by atheists as ineffectual "moderate" religion and
by fundamentalists as a "nominal" form of Christianity, is as its critics point out, a largely vapid and irrelevant force. . . . The liberal church is a largely middle-class, bourgeois phenomenon, filled with many people who have profited from industrialization, the American empire, and global capitalism. They often seem to think that if "we" can be nice and inclusive, everything will work out. The liberal church also usually buys into the myth that we can morally progress as a species. . . . It is this naïve belief in our goodness and decency—this inability to face the dark reality of human nature, our capacity for evil and the morally neutral universe we inhabit—that is the most disturbing aspect of all these belief systems. There is nothing in human nature or human history to support the idea that we are morally advancing as a species or that we will overcome the flaws of human nature (Hedges 2008: 4-5).

I should note that while progressive Christians often differentiate between themselves and
liberal Christianity, in the book study's reading of Hedges they clearly—and I think
accurately—saw themselves as part of the community Hedges critiques. They position
themselves as the objects of Hedges' criticisms because they do believe in the goodness of
human nature and the possibility of moral progress and many of the book study members did
not appreciate his criticism of this moral position. The fact that the group aligned itself with
liberal Christianity in this instance reveals much about the tension and fuzziness that emerges
at moments of articulating what progressive Christianity is about. In this case, progressive
Christians align with one of their proximate others in order to defend liberal Christians
against what they perceive to be unfair critique. As is often the case, there is a very specific
ethic at work here in which liberal Christian belief in the goodness of human nature and
moral progress is seen as the highest good and in order to defend it, progressive Christians take on or embody the label of liberal Christianity.

That night, as I watched Jon passionately plead his case for Hedges' works and then again for something completely different with Small Wonders, I was struck by the inconsistency between the two possibilities. Despite the fact that he had "won," Jon seemed disappointed that the group had not chosen one of Hedges' works. Additionally, while it was not explicitly discussed in book study, the church as a whole was still reeling from the departure of a number of long-time members of the community and from some financial difficulties. My impression of the conversation that night was that the book study group was looking for something lighter and something less politically driven. When we discussed the group's selection a few months later over drinks one Sunday afternoon at a local pub, Jon explained to me that he had wanted the group to read Hedges' works and begin to "think in that direction" but that he understood that Hedges was not for everyone. "Besides," Jon pointed out, "I can always read things like that on my own, I don't need the study group for that."

Jon's statement that he does not need the study group did not initially resonate with me. As a graduate student myself, I understand the benefits of reading and studying with others in a variety of settings but I am also acutely aware that solitary reading practices are usually the normative mode of reading for most North Americans and are often the most rewarding in that the reader can get what she needs out of the text without having to bear any responsibility towards other readers in terms of evaluation or explanation. But if Jon does not need the study group, why is he there? And why, when I began to study the development of
progressive Christianity, was I directed towards the study and discussion groups as the place where progressive Christianity was happening?

Why, after all those years of participating in online discussions, did Barry choose to attend the speaker series, adult education programming and church services at Holy Cross Lutheran Church? Why does the notion that West Hill United Church might not outlive ninety year old Hedy drive her to tears? Furthermore, why does Kevin—who on my first night at West Hill admitted to me that most people come to the book study for the socializing and the food—insist that the group take the time to discuss where the book study is heading? Finally, why is it considered a problem when I, as the ethnographer, participate in the voting process to select next year's book?

In this way, the collective reading practices of progressive Christians take on social and ethical meanings. Progressive Christians do not need the study group, but rather they choose to participate in it in order to make a direct statement about the theological, ideological and political directions in which progressive Christianity is heading. Furthermore they choose to do so because they believe it is the right thing to do. Linking religious activity to moral choice extends Peter Berger's (1979) well known argument that all contemporary religious agents are heretics by virtue of their participation in modern discourses of plausibility which set consideration of values, epistemologies, religiosities and paradigms as necessary. In sum, according to Berger we live with a 'heretical imperative' which for progressive Christians is not only a side-effect of religious life imposed by modernity but the defining feature of what it means to be Christian in the contemporary world and the preeminent attribute of progressive Christianity.
Participation in the book study and discussion groups relates to the language ideology possessed by progressive Christians that promotes intellectual integrity and the ethics of belief. In many ways the book study stands as a counterpart to the performative and ritualized speech-acts (e.g. prayers and liturgy) that serve as a major source of concern for progressive Christians in terms of assuring and gauging intellectual integrity. Indeed, within the context of the book study all speech-acts becomes ritualized as different members vie for authority derived from their knowledge of the text or topic under discussion as well as from opportunities to vocalize their opinions and doubts. Suzan's point that they cannot determine whether or not the book study has been successful based on whether or not participants read the book is important for determining what progressive Christians get out of the book study. Ultimately, it seems that the book study and discussion groups are about being together with each other's questions—that is, gathering physically around a text to discuss, debate and dialogue.

Attendance at the book study is a way for members to physically position themselves as participants amid the theological, ideological and other choices that they make. Spong's analogy of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, which is discussed in Chapter Two, is picked up here without the biblical metaphor. "We are all more or less moving in the same direction," the bishop explained to his audience. "As a pastoral figure, I need to make sure that no one diverts too far off of the path. Some are moving too quickly and I need to remind them to slow down and wait for the group, others are too slow and might get caught by the waters when they advance; I need to hurry them forward."

Once again, this image of moving forward both physically and chronologically is striking because it assumes that the positions of both the individuals and the communities are
physically and temporally bound, yet simultaneously fluid, equivocal and multivariate. While animated by many of the concerns and motivations that Keane identifies as part and parcel of the sincere speaking subject of Protestantism(s), progressive Christians subject this sincerity—along with its temporal, material and ideological accruements—not to a divine or 'other' force, but rather to their community itself. A community is likewise made up of sincere subjects whose individual and collective aesthetics and partialities when it comes to music, ritual, reading selections and food preferences among many, many other things, ultimately drive and define the very nature of progressive Christianity.

Definitions and choices are often negotiated as differences. In this study, the five churches at which I conducted fieldwork were all aware of each other. Indeed, I found them through each other. Gretta Vosper first told me about the Theological Studies Group at St. George's United Church in Peterborough, and I first met Pastor Dawn at Spong's visit to Peterborough in 2008. A member of Holy Cross Lutheran Church who commutes from Guelph to Newmarket on Sundays for church drew my attention to St. Matthias Anglican Church, and I met a member of the book study group from St. Peter's in the lunch-line at Holy Cross during the special weekend featuring John Dominic Crossan.

West Hill United Church is the by far the best known by the other churches because of its public profile but also the most insular in regards to discussing a progressive Christian movement in the region. They may be best known in part because they host the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity and are focused on promoting progressive Christianity to national and international audiences. That being said, apart from knowing about the other churches as places where Vosper had visited as a speaker, the members of the congregation at West Hill United Church had little knowledge of the interests and styles of services at the
other communities. For example, when I explained to one of the members of the book study at West Hill that the discussion group at Holy Cross Lutheran Church meets over drinks in a pub and begins its sessions by singing folk songs together, he expressed a longing to participate in that session, which to him "sounded a lot more fun." In contrast, at each of the other churches, representatives have attended services at West Hill and reported back on the topic of the sermon and the style of the services.

At the other churches, many of the individuals featured in this dissertation see West Hill as further ahead on the continuum of progressive Christianity and are quick to point out that West Hill's position at the head of the pack is not necessarily a good thing. They worry that Vosper and her congregation are "moving too quickly" and "are throwing the baby out with the bathwater." As Eileen, a member of the Theological Study Group at George Street, confided in me after reading With or Without God, "I thought she's spun off, right out into outer space." When I asked her for clarification, she explained that she felt that the book was too cerebral and vague about the day-to-day workings of progressive Christianity.

The critique is necessary and it's true but then after the critique where are we? What was her last conclusion? I don't think she recognises that we're just human beings grounded in this earth maybe needing meeting places. I'm not sure what kind of an ideal world—a real world, I mean a real world [Vosper depicts]. There were some vague (to me) descriptions of an ideal world and an ideal faith community. But where's the coffee? If we were just ethereal? But we're so earth-bound and I think that's the limit.

Indeed, the answer to Eileen's question, "where is the coffee?" (or steeped tea, beer, peanut free snack or afternoon glass of wine) is different at each of the communities as each tries to negotiate what progressive Christianity means to them. What they share is an understanding of congregational dynamics, which are directed from the bottom up. The choice to participate
in the book study or discussion groups means that one can and should expect to actively participate in shaping the direction of the congregation as a whole.

Related to this theme of choice is the theme of skepticism introduced in Chapter One. Alongside the imperative to choose is, for progressive Christians, an ethics of choosing and believing that demands that religious agents make choices that are intellectually tenable, morally pragmatic and most importantly sincerely enacted. In doing so, progressive Christians adopt a methodology of holding narratives, traditions and texts to rigorous analyses, vis-a-vis the ethics of belief, which is more applicable to some areas than others. Elsewhere, I have asked what the textual ideology held by progressive Christians would look like if it were to be applied to love (King 2005: 62). Despite its flirtation with scientific modalities and its interest in seeking origins often dressed up in the language of authenticity and purity, progressive Christianity remains entangled in the tensions inherent in decision-making and thinking about the future.

Indeed, much of the discourse on the future, which I encountered from both individuals and the community, spoke of the 'end'. My research subjects postulated different scenarios concerning the end of Christianity and the ultimate demise of their own churches. Hedy’s reflection that she hopes that West Hill United Church will last as long as she does suggests a real sense of the possibility that the community will not be around in the next decade. Few spoke explicitly of their own end, or death. Again, these conversations frequently were filled with ambiguity concerning the possibility of life after death and the process of dying. When the topic was addressed, I found that the older women in the community spoke to me as a mother speaks to her daughter; their tone was often gentle and reassuring. For example, in my conversation with Deborah—the woman who wonders the
degree to which they can "mine" biblical texts before they need a better resource—she spoke positively about death as a next step and hypothesized about the possibility of reincarnation, but ultimately turned her attention to me and the fact that death did not seem as immediate for someone my age. Initially, Deborah employs the analogy of a garden in explaining the abundance of spirituality she finds in her garden, a place where she and Mother Nature share the responsibility and the workload.

I find a lot of spirituality in the garden—I love to garden and it's not a very organized garden. I do about half or less and Mother Nature the rest. Just watching things grow. You plant that little carrot seed and a carrot comes every time, it doesn't come up a beet or anything else, it's a carrot. You look at the flower, watch the bees humming around there, their saddlebags full of pollen and flying anyway, just all kinds of things. It's just, the world is just humming around us, activity and things to watch and see. We're part of something so big that I'm just in awe when I'm out there.

Picking up on Deborah's theme of being "part of something big," I ask her what "something big" looks like. She pauses for a moment and muses about the possibility of reincarnation.

I have no proof and I've never had an experience which led me to think that reincarnation is true but it was the only thing that ever made any sense to me when a child was ill in a way that was life-threatening and was crippled for life. There's no . . . no justice in that. The only thing would be if you have many lives. If you were going through an education system, you go through different grades and you have to do certain things, and if you get it you move on and if you don't you go back and repeat the grade. You have certain tasks that we have set before, coming out of wherever we were and certain likes and dislikes. I watched a three-year old play an organ one time. She was known in the community. We went to her home and all you had to do was starting humming something. And this was a three year old, she was not exposed—sixty years ago, close too—and she would just pick it up and play it.

She couldn't touch the pedals at all, she was too small. It was just amazing to watch her hands. How did that happen to her? I could never learn to play like that. You watch a real musician play and think, how did they get there? And so there's some people have these special talents and you think they have to have come with them complete, they didn't have to study or anything. So it's always something, when I came across this reincarnation thing I thought who
knows? When I don't get to do something I really wanted to do, I say, oh well, that's on my list for my next life, next time around. So I guess we all muddle through with belief systems. We get to the end of our thinking and we say, "I surrender!" Anything could be out there.

At this point, Deborah turns the interview around and asks me why I am interested in studying religion. I tell her about a 1957 book about world religions, which belonged to my grandmother, that had always fascinated me as a child. I describe how on raining Saturday afternoons I would take it down off of the shelf and pour over the pictures of Shinto temple dancers, Hasidic children reading Torah and Michelangelo's famous depiction of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I explain how my grandmother had years ago filled the book with dried maple leafs that she had for some reason or another spray-painted gold and how reading her book about religion made me feel closer to her, despite the fact that she passed away before I was born.

"So, if reincarnation is true, you were probably in your past a Celtic woman leader," Deborah concludes. While her classification is unclear to me, I accept it without questioning, and Deborah draws a parallel between my proposed former life and future developments in the church.

Jesus said, I came to make you free! And yet, the Christian church said, "oh there are all these other rules: meatless Fridays and church every Sunday." You know, just all kinds of things. We're meant to be free, to make up our mind to choose wisely but to be free to choose. And of course the young people are doing that. Whether they're getting the same sense of joy, it's not likely, because we were the ones who were boxed in and we're free to think and do now, so it's a happy thing. That angry God is going, gone. It's very hard after half a century of believing something to change how you pray, or do you pray? Do you just be joyous and awe filled? I don't know. It will be interesting, I keep saying, wouldn't it be nice to be here fifty years from now and see what happens? You'll be here, but I won't. Anyway, it should be fun for you.
The contrast here in Deborah's comments between her criticism of the church, which has wrongfully promoted an angry God, and the nonchalant nature with which she discusses spirituality in the garden and the possibility of reincarnation is especially telling of progressive Christian representations of temporality. A conversation about "what comes next" in terms of life after death quickly diverts into a conversation about the past. Deborah remembers witnessing a little girl play the organ sixty years ago, but she now imagines that the little girl may have been herself as a musician in her past life. When I explain my own interest in studying religion (which I also resolve by telling a story about my own links and connection to the past through a text), Deborah concludes that my interest in that field of study is likewise related to a past life. Concerning the future of the church, Deborah knows only that she will not be around to witness what comes next.

Others featured in this study did not share Deborah's optimism that I will be there to record something "fun." Hedy's worries that the church will not even be around for as long as she will be was echoed frequently in regards to both social and economic concerns. Progressive Christians are concerned about the lack of young people in their congregations. However, they are not worried about their message being irrelevant but rather their method of distributing it being so. For example, one of my interlocutors speaks of a future in which they will drop the word "church" from their names because the term carries too much "baggage." Still others are worried that the high costs of maintaining church buildings and programming will eventually be too much for the congregations to support. Many see themselves coming to a natural fork in the road but are uncertain about what, if anything at all, lies ahead.
It is here where Eileen's question, "where is the coffee?", resounds again. The juxtaposition between progressive Christianity as a distinctively articulated movement—in which questions of what books to read and how they affect the development of progressive Christianity are predominant—alongside the reality of a book study group where people come to socialize and consume food is an important theme that I have tried to develop in this dissertation. Within progressive Christianity religion is as much a leisure activity as it is a space of theological construction and articulation. "We are Christian because we have always been Christian," I was told over and over again throughout my research when I asked how one could be a Christian without believing in God, Jesus or the bible.

"I was born a Christian and I will die a Christian," one of my interlocutors emphatically exclaimed. "A very different type of Christian," she continued, "but Christian nonetheless." She smiles as she makes this statement and then pauses and takes another sip of her tea. Before I have a chance to respond or ask for clarification she carries on discussing how she has changed and what books and thinkers have promoted this change.

In a moment she is up and reaching to the top shelf of her bookcase. "Have you read this book?"
The Eight Points – The Center for Progressive Christianity, USA (TCPC)

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who...

1. Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

2. Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.

3. Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus's name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples.

4. Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to):

   believers and agnostics,
   conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
   women and men,
   those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
   those of all races and cultures,
   those of all classes and abilities,
   those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.

5. Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.

6. Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty - more value in questioning than in absolutes.

7. Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.

8. Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.
Our Eight Points – Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, Canada (CPCP)

(http://progressivechristianity.ca)

By calling ourselves "progressive" we mean that we:

1. centre our faith on values that affirm the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life, the inherent and equal worth of all persons, and the supremacy of love expressed actively in our lives as compassion and social justice;

2. engage in a search that has roots in our Christian heritage and traditions;

3. embrace the freedom and responsibility to examine traditionally held Christian beliefs and practices, acknowledging the human construction of religion, and in the light of conscience and contemporary learning, adjust our views and practices accordingly;

4. draw from diverse sources of wisdom, regarding all as fallible human expressions open to our evaluation of their potential contribution to our individual and communal lives;

5. find more meaning in the search for understanding than in the arrival at certainty; in the questions than the answers;

6. encourage inclusive, non-discriminatory, non-hierarchical community where our common humanity is honoured in a trusting atmosphere of mutual respect and support;

7. promote forms of individual and community celebration, study, and prayer that use understandable, inclusive, non-dogmatic, value-based language by which people of religious, skeptical, or secular backgrounds may be nurtured and challenged;

8. commit to journeying together, our ongoing growth characterized by honesty, integrity, openness, respect, intellectual rigour, courage, creativity, and balance.
Appendix B – List of Book Studies and Books

**George Street United Church**

September – December 2008:


**West Hill United Church**

September – December 2008:


January – May 2009:


January – May 2010:


**Holy Cross Lutheran Church**

Winter 2009:


Fall 2009:


Procter-Murphy, Jeff and David Felton (producers and writers). 2009. "Saving Jesus" *Living the Questions DVD Series*. 
**St. Peter's Anglican Church**

September 2009 – April 2010:


**St. Matthias Anglican Church**

Summer 2010:

Appendix C – Journey of Transformation

[This document was originally posted online on West Hill's Facebook page, on Saturday, October 2, 2010 at 2:33pm. I have corrected a few minor typos in the original document.]

We are ready for tomorrow's celebration of those who are being recognized as supporters of the Journey of Transformation that West Hill is on and those who are making a commitment to share that journey with us. Preparing has been an exciting time and we hope you are able to join us tomorrow, wherever you are.

In order to do so, here are some of the elements of our gathering. We will be having a communion meal during our service and extending our sense of communion into our Visitors' and Travelers' lunch which follows the service. We're using my kitchen table for our service and so we invite you to join us at your kitchen table. For many years, we've been recognizing that it is often when we gather with friends, family, and coworkers that we come to know one another best. Since communion is, for us, about community and building it within us and among us, we think kitchen tables are perfect for our celebration.

A reflective reading you may wish to use is below. We invite you to have a loaf or roll of bread and a cup or glass ready to be filled with juice or whatever beverage you prefer. At the conclusion of the reflection, you simply act as though you are with us, and break bread, fill and drink from your cup, and know you are not alone.

We are born into family.
As we grow, our families grow into communities.
Friends and acquaintances become connected to us through our play, our work, our commitments.
The web of connections we live and share is thickened each time we care for one another,
celebrate each other's joys,
shoulder burdens together,
and stand in a shelter created by love.
We are blessed and held by this interweaving of affection.
The most ordinary things are what strengthen this web of love —
conversation, laughter, the sharing of a meal.
Around the ordinary tables of our lives we tell each other about our deepest fears,
our richest joys,
and the things that are meaningful to us.

Around the ordinary tables of our lives that we find those who will hear us,
look into our eyes as we speak of who we are,
see how delicate our hope is,  
and hold us to it.

This, my table, is a table like that.  
I can see it as a symbol of all those things  
we might be to one another  
and our commitment to that task.  
For this is one of those places  
I can gather friends and family members to tell our stories,  
to listen to the truths that others share.  
This is one of those places  
I can welcome others that we might find the space in our hearts to love,  
and the strength in our arms to care.  
This is one of those places  
where I and others can hold out  
the tattered fragments of our dreams  
and know that we will see the beauty in them  
not only because of what they once were  
but because of what they are  
and what they might yet be—  
of who we are who hold them.  
This is a table to which we might be all that for one another.

Today, my table is enormous because,  
through the work of West Hill United,  
I share it with many people,  
across Canada and in other countries in the world.  
And I share in the work of the United Church of Canada  
through that connection.  
Through the UCC,  
I share love in communities I may never visit,  
in countries I may never see,  
in dreams I may never share,  
and in lives I may never know.  
This morning, those lives and dreams are here at my table.  
And here, I remember, that I am a dreamer, too,  
and in the world of my dreams  
I see a world of peace, justice, beauty, and truth.

Take a moment to consider some of your dreams. Then break your bread, fill your cup, eat, drink, and know that on this journey, you are never alone.

Amen; So be it
Appendix D – Visionworks

In Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation I refer to West Hill United Church's statement of faith.

Visionworks 2009

As individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a diversity of viewpoints, we come together in community, holding in common a reverence for life that moves us to pursue justice, seek truth, live fully, care deeply, and make a difference in the world. While united by life-enhancing values, we are enriched and challenged by our differences in perspectives and beliefs.

As we strive to develop meaningful community, we draw from our origins in an historic religious tradition, the knowledge gained about that tradition over time, diverse sources of insight and wisdom, and contemporary ethical and philosophical thought. We distill from these sources the core values we believe are fundamental to right relations with self, others, all life, and the planet. In this progressive work, we attempt to demonstrate openness, intellectual rigour, honesty, courage, creativity, sensitivity, and respect.

VisionWorks articulates those common values and understandings that underlie our choices as we set priorities, make decisions, take action, and relate with one another in community. It reflects what we hold to be of utmost significance in our community life, and calls us to evaluate ourselves in light of these values.

Our grounding is the interconnectedness of all life

It is with a deep sense of awe and joy that we acknowledge the wonder of life in all its dimensions. As part of the organic whole we experience life intimately, yet recognize that much is, and may always be, beyond our comprehension.

We attest to the capacity to experience and create meaning and purpose beyond physical survival and material gain. This dimension of living, which may be referred to as the spiritual, reaches to the depths of our inner self and also transcends the self as we connect with others and with all of life.

We experience both freedom and limitations in our lives. Within that tension we strive to engage with others as interrelated, self-reflective beings, responsible for our choices.

Moved by the interrelatedness of life, we choose as foundational the ethical and relational values we believe enhance life and strive to integrate these in the priorities we set and the decisions we make, both individually and as a community.

We are aware of the wide diversity of understandings of the concepts of truth, goodness, meaning, and spirituality, as well as the many promises, predictions, and truth claims of religions and philosophies. Within that diversity, we ground our choices in our
interconnections and, with our core values as a guide, explore and evaluate possibilities, embrace what we each deem helpful, and demonstrate respect for differences.

We open ourselves to new understandings of life and relationship that challenge our previously held perspectives, while availing ourselves of aspects of our heritage that resonate with our values.

**Our response to life is love**

We choose love as our supreme value. We understand love to mean the choice to act with justice, compassion, integrity, courage, forgiveness, kindness, peace, generosity, responsibility, an appreciation of beauty, and other life-enhancing values.

We acknowledge that, as a part of the web of life, we have a significant impact on the environment and all other life with which we share the planet. We therefore strive to live consciously and caringly, increasing our awareness of the consequences of our actions, advocating for rights, and making ethically responsible decisions.

We embrace a vision of peace through social justice for all people, of all races, ethnicities, abilities, socioeconomic situations, and sexual identities and orientations. We identify and resist injustice, including oppressive and de-humanizing conditions, social structures, activities, messages, ideas, and attitudes. We help create, support, and celebrate those conditions that promote rights, respect, equity, dignity, and community.

 Seeking a healthy balance between self-care and care for others, we share time, energy, talents, wisdom, knowledge, skills, material goods, and our presence with one another in order that we may inspire, encourage, delight, comfort, and help one another.

 We consider relationships to be both serious responsibility and joyful privilege, calling for commitment, humility, and light-heartedness. We strive to relate with one another authentically and supportively. We value assertiveness, attentive listening, and empathetic response, and encourage the sharing of diverse views, requiring only that communication be respectful. We work toward creative problem solving and conflict resolution. In times of broken trust, we seek mutual understanding, forgiveness, and healing.

 In areas of ethical complexity, cultural diversity, and conflicting worldviews, we uphold the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and expression, and support freely-made choice. When making moral decisions as a community, we study issues comprehensively, acknowledge uncertainty, and apply life-enhancing values as appropriately and sensitively as possible.

**Our sources for inspiration are diverse**

In order to gain insight and wisdom for individual and communal living, we actively seek out diverse resources that may inspire us, arouse curiosity, encourage questions, and challenge our perspectives.
We regard explanations of life, proposals for beliefs, and historical claims as human, and therefore fallible, attempts to make sense of what is known and unknown. All ideas are formed in particular historical, cultural, and personal contexts and we, in turn, interpret from within ours.

We consider no text, tradition, organization, person, or interpretation of experience to be inherently authoritative; rather, we assess all resources on their own merit and honour life-enhancing values in whatever setting they occur.

We draw inspiration from ancient and contemporary sources including the arts, creative works, science, wisdom traditions, religion, nature, humanitarian efforts, and each other, directly and indirectly.

In group and individual study of resources, we encourage personal evaluation of content, questioning and reflection, and the sharing of insights and suggestions for application.

We strive to communicate our perspectives with clarity and sensitivity, conscious that ambiguity and differing worldviews are inevitable. We take care to own our own stories, experiences, and interpretations. As well, we may also offer one another alternate views, information, and interpretation of the application of core values. When communicating on behalf of the community, we choose messages that reflect our core values.

**Our gatherings are multi-faceted**

We meet regularly to celebrate together, share experience and wisdom, develop relationships, and sense and express gratitude, awe, devotion, concern, and commitment to action.

We make use of word, music, silence, art, movement, and symbol, attempting to speak to various personal styles, appeal to all the senses, and address the whole person.

We view all traditions, practices, and rituals as attempts to facilitate meaningful experiences and learning opportunities, recognizing that responses differ among individuals. We create means for acknowledging and celebrating the significance of community and life events such as birth, partnering, loss, death, and personal and community accomplishments.

We offer a variety of opportunities to focus our thoughts, share joys, express needs and concern, engage in self-reflection, and commit ourselves to action. These are referred to in various ways including prayer, meditation, inner awareness, and connection.

We offer educational, experiential, and social opportunities in areas such as personal growth, spirituality, relationships, social action, the environment, health and well-being, religion, history, science, literature, music, and contemporary issues.

We promote cooperation among all in the visioning, planning, and operational aspects of our community life. We assist individuals in discovering and developing talents to be offered
within and beyond our community, and designate individuals to fulfill specific spiritual and administrative leadership responsibilities.

**Our vision is growth**

We take responsibility for continuing to seek and create meaning for ourselves, each person choosing his or her own focus and pace and respecting the right of others to choose theirs. We acknowledge the possibility of growth during the inevitable discouraging, static, and challenging periods in our lives.

We seek out resources, relationships, and environments that may nurture and challenge us. We offer opportunities for nurture and challenge to others.

We evaluate our lives in light of our core values. We celebrate areas of growth yet also face the reality of our shortcomings and their impact on us, others, and the world. We identify areas in our own lives and the life of the community that we feel need to be addressed, seek forgiveness where appropriate, and attempt positive change wherever possible.

As we examine ideas and truth claims to determine their worth and relevance for us, we enjoy the freedom to retain or alter our previous understandings. We recognize that change, even when resulting in positive growth, can involve both loss and gain.

We contribute to the growth of this spiritual community in order that it might thrive as a positive influence in our lives and the broader community. We also contribute as individuals and a community to the growth of other organizations that promote life-enhancing values.

We seek to increase our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world and improve our ability to make a positive difference. We encourage and support one another as we each strive to fulfill our potential as responsible, loving people.

As we strive to live in these ways as individuals in community, we often soar and often stumble. Yet in joy and sorrow, in triumph and trial, in certainty and doubt, we are not alone for we travel together in the spirit of love.
Appendix E – The Prayer of Jesus: A Paraphrase


Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be.
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope
and come to earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From the trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
    now and forever.
Amen.

By Jim Cotter (1988)
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