

## Why Progressive Religion Needs Progressive Secularism

Chris Highland

*“The better part of [us] is soon ploughed into the soil for compost.”*

~Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The noun, *progress*, means “forward or onward movement toward a destination.” One major question for our day becomes: Is our worldview moving us forward and if so, what is the destination?

So-called progressives, faith or no faith, have to ask this question. And answer it clearly. Otherwise, we—with all our pet perspectives—will simply dissolve into irrelevance, defending our fences and fields while waiting to be ploughed into the ground for compost. We ought to learn when to let go and honestly move on.

Many of my family and friends are believers. My wife is a Christian minister. When we’re together, do we have time to argue over the super-somewhere or super-Something? Of course not. Whatever sexy labels we call ourselves, we appear to be most interested in moving forward, onward, to something good, something a bit better, in the here, now and present. What one of us believes or does not believe may be interesting conversation. Common concerns take the place of “holding ground.”

Last month I left a comment on a post by progressive Christian Brian McLaren on Patheos (“A Desirable Future for Progressive Faith: Three Conversions Required,” July 29, 2015). McLaren says some helpful things, directed toward the faithful. I especially appreciate his third conversion of the faithful, to collaboration for “the common good and service.” He mentions various religions working together with “other neighbors” (a nod in the secular direction, I assume). I responded,

*“Good. And I would hope that list of collaborators would include Seculars who--contrary to what some in both old and new theo-camps think--may be just as committed to justice, joy and peace. After all, good pragmatic ethics arise from boots and beliefs on the ground and do not drop down from a supernatural somewhere.”*

McLaren says the very first “conversion” for Christians should be centering faith “in a way of life rather than a system of beliefs.” This was underwhelming for me, since we were saying this way way back in my Evangelical days in high school. “Not a Religion; a Relationship.” This was fairly obvious to us in Liberal seminary days as well. “Not a Theology; a Service” (the question through all those years was the same: Wasn’t this the main message of Jesus—so why is it ignored?).

So, even Evangelicals and Liberals can identify the **pro** part of Progress. The destination may be “heaven” (or, for McLaren, the Kingdom), but we get THERE by being most present HERE. **Doing right is better than believing right. And, I would hasten to add, this applies to seculars as well.** Here’s the twist: Doing right (the

Good) is better than not-believing right. Who cares if I'm a "good atheist?" What am I doing in my life and is it about progress, for me and for others? I'd rather be remembered (as I'm ploughed under) as a good Human Being—wouldn't you?

I enjoy discussing issues of faith with people, especially progressives. Overall I think they feel stuck. Some admire me for jumping ship; others just don't see a way out or a viable alternative. There is a sense of resignation that's sad to see. They may even admit, as I did way way back, that the Church is not what Jesus was about. Justice and compassion and cooperative good work is the point. Yet, what is the alternative to Churchism? They don't know. "Community" is a word that creeps back into the discussion; but they can be as skeptical as I am about that. Then, it's just too hard for many to let go of "worship" as the primary goal—the ultimate destination. How progressive can worship be, though, based as it is on ancient words, writings and worldviews?

When it comes to the Church, I just don't see a future. Faith, yes. People will always have faith in other worlds and beings. Seems endemic (epidemic too). But Churchism, like Christianity, is, at best, an endangered species. One we should allow to die out.

What should not be allowed to die out is a commitment to doing what is right and good and necessary. Progressive thinkers will do what progressive thinkers do: think and make progress. As secular blogger Adam Lee put it, "[What] I hope for and foresee is a secular community that's more engaged in doing good deeds and not just attacking religion. Criticizing the harms of faith is both good and necessary, but it can't be all we do" ("The Maturing Secular Community," Patheos, August 10, 2015). Progressives of any hue could take that to heart.

New York Times columnist **Thomas Friedman** just wrote something that caught my eye:

"Here's my bet about the future of Sunni, Shiite, Arab, Turkish, Kurdish and Israeli relations: If they don't end their long-running conflicts, Mother Nature is going to destroy them all long before they destroy one another." He's talking about the heat, climate change, the environment. Later he nails the point: "All the people in this region are playing with fire. While they're fighting [over Religion] and to whom God really gave the holy land, Mother Nature is not sitting idle. She doesn't do politics—only physics, biology and chemistry. . . . There is no [Religious] air or [Religious] water, there is just 'the commons.' " ("The World's Hot Spot," NYT, August 19, 2015).

That's what I call **true progressive thinking!** Millions may not want to hear this, but spirituals and seculars alike can get behind this call from the minarets of mindfulness. The right answers—hell, the right questions!—for our future will not be coming from Theology and those who play that Game of God-Talk. In the same way I manage a

house full of independent seniors, spending an inordinate amount of time “keeping the peace,” we have to find the smartest ways to manage our Big House, faith or no faith.

The “progressive” poet Walt Whitman had to calm himself after looking more deeply at the world around him to realize the whole earth is one big compost bin. It horrified him, until he wondered and reasoned and understood that the earth “grows such sweet things out of such corruptions” (“This Compost”).

Could this happen with faith? Can there be real progress? Here’s the startling possibility: **“progressive unbelievers” may be the only hope for “progressive believers.”** More pointedly: Wise atheism might just be the salvation for wise faith. Incredible? Maybe. But Thoreau, Friedman, Whitman and even believers like McLaren are right: it’s all compost, but it’s common compost, and it’s OUR compost (Compost Is Us), and there is certainly a gentle whiff of sweetness from time to time. What might grow remains to be seen.

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