Christianity in the 21st century

Four studies for groups

Avril Hannah-Jones
Contents

About these studies

Aim 4

What the studies are about 4

Guidelines for the leader 5

The structure of each study 5

Resources needed 6

Other resources 6

The studies

Study 1 Living in the modern (postmodern) world 7

Study 2 Living as one faith among many 16

Study 3 Living as part of God’s good creation 24

Study 4 Living as Christian radicals 32

Endnotes 42
About these studies

Aim

The aim of these studies is to help you reflect on living as Christian in Australia in the twenty-first century.

What the studies are about

As Australian Christians we have the challenging task of living in a modern and postmodern world while living out a faith whose roots are pre-modern.

The foundational events of the Christian faith: Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, occurred almost 2000 years ago. We read and study scriptures first written thousands of years ago, and collected as a canon some 1500 years ago. We administer sacraments first described in those ancient scriptures and continue to welcome people into the church and to gather as a community in words and actions modelled on ancient sources. We are part of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ, but we are divided by two millennia from those who first gathered as Church and proclaimed Jesus as Lord.

How are we to live as Christians in the twenty-first century?

This series of four studies will begin to look at what it means to be Christians in twenty-first century Australia. The studies will examine some history, so we understand where we are and how it is that we got here. They will look at two of the biggest challenges facing Christians today: living in a religiously pluralist world after centuries of Christian domination in the West; and caring for creation at a time when human progress and development is causing environmental damage and degradation. Finally, the last study will look at the political implications of twenty-first century Christianity. Are we ready to be martyrs?
Guidelines for the leader

Leading a group to use these studies requires no special skills. The material can simply be worked through in the order it appears. The leader should invite different people to read several paragraphs each, pausing from time to time to invite brief comments or observations, without allowing these to deflect the group from the flow of the material.

When it comes to the questions, divide into groups of no more than five or six people each. Invite each group to bring back to the larger group two or three insights they found particularly helpful or challenging. These will need to be brief.

Please feel free to adapt the material to the needs of your group. If you find that one or more studies require more time, you may like to adapt it to spread it over two sessions.

Allocate about 90 minutes for each study. People will expect you to keep fairly strictly to this time.

The structure of each study

Each study has been built around a common structure:

- An opening prayer.
- Some questions to open up the topic.
- Some material to read and questions to discuss.
- Some things to do.
- A closing prayer.
Resources needed

It would be advisable for all participants in the studies to have access to:

- this study booklet

Other resources

Although these four studies are intended to be self-contained, on their own they form only one part of a set of studies produced and recommended by the Doctrine Working Group of the Uniting Church in Australia’s National Assembly for the Season of Teaching and Learning. These are:

- *Jesus Christ according to the Basis of Union*, by Geoff Thompson
- *Living the Christian life* by Rod Horsfield

These are also available from Mediacom. See www.mediacom.org.au.
Study 1  Living in the modern (postmodern) world

This study will consider how Western societies (including Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand) came to be the way they are today.

Prayer

You may like to commence this study with prayer.

Getting started

Divide into three groups. Utilising the wonders of time travel, some of you journey back to 1900, some to 1000, and some to AD 1. What differences do you notice as you tour your particular historical period? How do you describe your own time to the people you meet?

In 1913 the French Catholic poet and essayist Charles Péguy said: “the world has changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years.” (A year later he would be dead, killed in the First World War.) In the century since Péguy’s declaration the rate of change has increased. What changes have you noticed in your own lifetime? How, in particular, has the church changed?

How the world became modern

Australia is a multicultural, multifaith nation, situated in the Asia-Pacific, and home to the oldest living cultures on earth. Yet mainstream Australian culture is primarily a descendant of Western or European thought and experience. In order to understand twenty-first century Australia, we need some knowledge of this Western European history.

Christianity came to Western Europe in the early centuries after Jesus, and communal societies adopted a communal faith. From the time that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, to
the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the Western world lived in “Christendom.” Each country had a church which was closely linked to the monarch, and clergy and nobility worked together. Churches had both political and social power. In the modern world, this power has gradually slipped away, and we are now living in a post-Christendom world. This study explores some of how that happened.

The Enlightenment

Historians call the century between the English Revolution in 1688 and the French Revolution in 1789 “the Enlightenment.” If there was a moment when the Western world moved from being pre-modern to modern, this was it. Enlightenment philosophers believed that reason and criticism were a better way of reaching the truth than revelation, the Bible, or authority, the church or the king, and that a better world could be created by rational social reform. Everything was to be judged by reason, including faith. In the Enlightenment, theology ceased to be “faith seeking understanding” and became “faith requiring justification.”

These new ways of thinking had huge implications for Christianity. When “scientific reasoning” became the dominant way of understanding everything, and observation, experimentation and human experience the only legitimate sources of knowledge, belief in supernatural miracles, special revelation, the incarnation and resurrection were dismissed as irrational. For Enlightenment thinkers articles of faith like the divinity of Christ and the triune nature of God needed to be proven, and yet there was no acceptably “rational” way of proving them. No experiment could be constructed to test Jesus’ divinity. Many Enlightenment philosophers turned away from Christianity to seek a rational, natural religion, Deism, in which God created the world and provided the basis of human morality, but did not intervene in the universe or in human life.

Enlightenment thought did not turn everyone into atheists or Deists. The Enlightenment launched the “modern” world, but it was still primarily a Christian world. It would take another couple of centuries for Enlightenment values to lead to any sort of widespread atheism.
The Enlightenment influenced Christianity in ways that we can still see today, good and bad. Whereas earlier societies had been communally focussed, the Enlightenment encouraged the independence of the individual. Faith became a matter of choice and a state of the heart rather than a belief system held by everyone. Religious tolerance was a product of the Enlightenment, for which every person who enjoys the right to worship freely in Australia today can give thanks.

The Enlightenment produced the printing press and with it, access to the Scriptures for ordinary people. It also gave them tools for reading scripture that had previously only been available to clergy and academics. The Enlightenment emphasis on experience as a source of knowledge also opened up new sources for theology. When we theologise using reason and our experience alongside the scriptures and tradition, we are drawing on Enlightenment ways of thinking.

Historians tell us that the Enlightenment ended with the French Revolution. People were so disillusioned with the violence they saw that it challenged their belief in reason and human progress. But we continue to live in an Enlightenment world. Individual freedom and equality before the law have Enlightenment origins. Continuing progress in the physical, biological and medical sciences depend on Enlightenment practices of reason and experimentation. These practical outcomes of Enlightenment philosophy have lasted.

We can also see the ongoing effects of Enlightenment thought in the New Atheism of people like Professor Richard Dawkins. The mission of the Richard Dawkins Foundation of Reason and Science could have been written in the eighteenth century.

Our mission is to support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and human suffering. (Richard Dawkins Foundation of Reason and Science)4

Alongside the development of the printed word came increasing literacy, a product of parish schools in Protestant countries and of schools run by religious orders in Catholic ones. This included scientific literacy. In the first half of
the nineteenth century major developments in disciplines including geology, physics and pathology coincided with an expansion in publishing that brought scientific news to an enormous readership. Many books, like some published by the Religious Tract Society in the 1840s and 1850s in Britain, were aimed at teaching non-scientists how the study of nature revealed the wisdom and goodness of God. Even the discoveries made by geologists of the age of the earth weren’t initially seen as contrary to Scripture as people found ways of reconciling its great age with the creation stories of Genesis. But some people did start to be worried by the geologists’ hammers. John Ruskin wrote in 1852:

If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses … (John Ruskin in an 1852 letter to Sir Henry Acland)\textsuperscript{5}

It was evolution, rather than the age of the earth, that caused the most problems for Christians, simply because Charles Darwin’s \textit{On the Origin of the Species} was so popular. The masses read it or at least read about it and, by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, those Christians who could not accept “ape ancestors” started actively campaigning against evolution. Several American states passed laws forbidding the teaching of human evolution, laws tested in the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925), which the opponents of evolution won, while losing the publicity war.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Christian reactions}

While many Christians came to terms with scientific and historical discoveries, some did not. Some gave up their faith altogether and became atheists. For them, God died in the nineteenth century. Sometime between 1908 and 1910 the English poet Thomas Hardy wrote a poem called “God’s Funeral” that gave voice to the sadness this “death” caused. Hardy described the lost sweetness of beginning the day with prayer and ending it with the assurance of God’s blessing, and asked: “And who or what shall fill [God’s] place?”\textsuperscript{7}
Others sought to remove everything that was not “scientific” from Christianity, and became followers of Jesus the Teacher and Moral Exemplar. Their heirs are the Progressive Christians who “believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life” without believing in Jesus’ divinity.

A third group took the opposite approach. The term “fundamentalist” comes from a series of pamphlets published in America between 1910 and 1915 by the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association. According to these pamphlets the “fundamentals” of the faith were: the inerrancy of scripture, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection and Christ’s divinity. Fundamentalists take the modern, scientific, understanding of truth, and apply it to articles of faith.

Fundamentalism is an increasingly popular way of being religious in the twenty-first century. For those whose lives have been disrupted by the destruction of traditional societies and for those who feel left behind by the modern world fundamentalism offers hope. In a time of increasing change it offers stability and security. We cannot understand Christianity in the twenty-first century without understanding fundamentalism’s attraction.

In Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures Through the Looking Glass, the White Queen advises Alice to practice believing six impossible things every morning before breakfast. It’s good advice. Unless we practice believing in the impossible daily and diligently, we cannot be Christians, those strange creatures who proclaim to believe that the Power who created the entire universe willingly and lovingly abdicated that power and became a human baby. (Madeleine L’Engle)

Discussion

1. How important is it for Christians to be able to explain and validate our faith scientifically? Should we accept that we believe in the impossible?
2. How does the Uniting Church reconcile faith with “literary, historical and scientific enquiry”? Look particularly at paragraph 5 “The Biblical Witnesses,” paragraph 9 “Creeds” and paragraph 11 “Scholarly Interpreters” in the Basis of Union.

Postmodernism: there is no truth!

We live in the modern world; but we also live in a variety of postmodern worlds. Since we are still in the middle of it, historians have not yet neatly defined “postmodernism” as a historical period, but it does provide us with some useful ways of understanding the world we are living in.

Just as this war has been more dreadful than any war in history, so, we may be sure, would the next war be even more dreadful than this. The prostitution of science for the purposes of sheer destruction is not likely to stop short. (Lord Lansdowne in an open letter printed in the Daily Telegraph on November 29, 1917.)

The Enlightenment is said to have ended with the French Revolution. It was impossible to reconcile the violence of the French Revolution with a belief in human progress and perfectibility. The twentieth century continued to challenge those who believed in the power of reason and the wonders of science. The First World War in which civilised Christian nations fought each other appalled many. The dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War further tested belief in human progress. Postmodernism is partly a response to the horrors of the twentieth century.

Postmodernism rejects Enlightenment claims for the unquestionable power of reason, science and human progress. When we look closely at the Enlightenment’s “reasoning person” we see an educated white male. Postmodernism rejects attempts to tell everybody’s story from the point of view of one person or group. Postmodern studies of society, history and science see “truths” rather than “truth.”
Postmodernity helps to defend faith from those who find it scientifically unreasonable; postmodernism would challenge the New Atheist belief that life and truth are defined by “reason.” However, the postmodern insistence on multiple truths also makes life difficult for religions that believe in a single Truth.

Perhaps what is most postmodern about our religious world is its extreme individualism; the belief that we can choose for ourselves which doctrines of a faith that we wish to accept and which we reject. An individual faith that picks and chooses from multiple religions is often called “Sheilaism,” from a subject in religious sociologist Robert Bellah’s 1985 study of Americans, *Habits of the Heart*.

I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice ... It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other. (Sheila Larson, quoted in *Habits of the Heart*, 1985)\(^{11}\)

We live in a world in which people are happy to proclaim themselves “spiritual” rather than “religious”; a world of Mind, Body, Spirit festivals in which people can “attend one of the many free inspirational seminars, book [themselves] in for a psychic reading, try some body pampering and take a break at the free performance stage.\(^{12}\) Understandably, this has caused some frustration for those who regard themselves as “religious.”

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself. (Lillian Daniel in *Spiritual but Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me*)\(^{13}\)
**Discussion**

1. Lillian Daniel says that one of the things that make religion challenging and interesting is digging deeply into a tradition that we did not invent all for ourselves. What aspects of the Christian tradition particularly challenge you?

2. Living in a postmodern world, we cannot escape being affected by “Sheilaism” and the “spiritual but not religious” movement. Even those of us who attend church regularly, and would be “religious fanatics” in Sheila’s terms do some picking and choosing for ourselves. Given that, which parts of Christianity do you think are essential? What makes Christianity Christian? Have a look particularly at paragraph 3 of the *Basis of Union*.

**Where we are now**

We live in the modern world and in various postmodern worlds, and there is no escape from that. Christianity is a religion that always seeks to exist inside a culture. In the same way that God was incarnate, or made flesh, in Jesus Christ, Christianity is incarnate, or made flesh, in the languages, ideas, values and patterns of behaviour of particular societies. Every generation of Christians must ask: ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us, today?’ Our Christianity must be a Christianity of twenty-first century Australia. But that is not all it can be.

We live in a world that is modern in its belief in science and reason. Christians believe that there is more to life than reason, and that Christianity gives us answers to questions that science cannot. The meaning of life cannot be measured scientifically, and faith is not a falsifiable proposition.

We live in a world that is postmodern in its embrace of spirituality and its mistrust of religious authorities. Christians accept that we cannot simply embrace and discard parts of the faith of the church as we choose, and that part of our spirituality involves belonging to a religious institution.
Christianity in twenty-first century Australia must both exist in its cultural setting and be counter-cultural. In the next three studies we will look at ways in which we can live out this particular incarnation of Christianity.

**Discussion**

This has been a very Western history of the past three hundred years. If your background isn’t Western European, how is your history different? Are there any extra contradictions between your culture and modern/postmodern Australia?

**Things to do**

Between now and the next study, ponder your understanding of the Christian faith. Can you identify points where your faith has been influenced by the Enlightenment, modernism, postmodernism?

Do you think being Christian makes a difference to the way people live in multicultural, multifaith Australia? Between now and the next study, stop every so often to think about what you’re doing or saying. Is it influenced by your faith?

Have a look at Geoff Thompson’s series of studies on *Jesus Christ according to the Basis of Union* (available from Mediacom) for an exploration of the ways in which the Uniting Church understands Christ and how the Uniting Church answers the question: “Who is Jesus Christ for us, today?”

**Prayer**

One person may like to close in prayer.