



# Truth on Trial: Seeking a Second Hearing in Athens and Australia

## Introduction

In speaking publically in pluralist Australia the closest we are biblically to being on Trial for the Truth, is with Paul, in Acts 17. I'll cover this through 3Cs – Contextualization, Connection, Correction.

### 1. Contextualisation (horses for courses) - vv. 16-21

After being booted out of Thessalonica and Beroea, Paul is isolated in Athens and after wandering around like Socrates is disturbed ('apopleptic') at omnipresent idols (v.16). Compare the reaction to The Elephant God procession stopping traffic on a highway in India and a Christian child's horrified reaction to idols correcting her theologian father's relative indifference. He soon recognised that he (and we), in facing our more subtle/sophisticated idols produced by the human 'idol factory' (Calvin), should still be deeply disturbed.

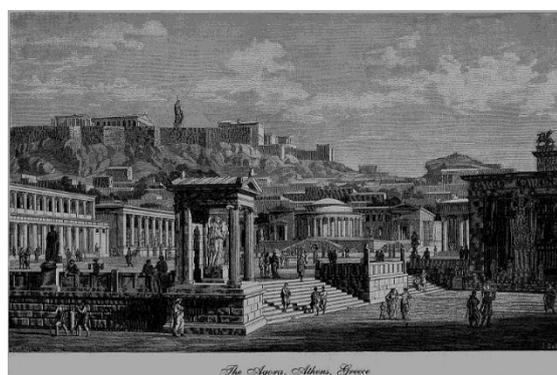
Idolatry is not just harmless, 'pie in the sky' superstition. It has catastrophic consequences in this life and the next. Recently SBS news showed disturbing images of Indians, in the midst of a Hindu, humanly and politically constructed pandemic, covering themselves in cow dung to ward off Covid-19 with the incense of sacred cows. This is deadly, dangerous ignorance. But while the form might be different in Australia we should also not be angrily condemning them for ignorant idolatry. I was told we should angrily condemn idolaters, by a visiting English preacher two days after 9/11 in 2001. Tone is important, as I posture: as former Q&A presenter Tony Jones said after my PhD mentor, now Yale theology Professor Miroslav Volf appeared – he raised the whole tone and others followed.

The last 20 years since 9/11 have seen a magnifying of multicultural Public Religion as dangerous - anger, iconoclasm, cancel culture and history, culture and curriculum wars. All of these are often magnified by anonymous and non-face to face digital communication. A peaceful, welcoming posture, tone or ethos is critical in Christian communication, especially public communication.

Those seeking to forcefully re-capture the 'seven mountains' or spheres of culture for Christianity that the PM recently referred to at a Gold Coast conference, need to re-read the passage they take it from. In Isaiah 2 the nations, and every culture and sphere, will be drawn to the temple mount of Zion/Jerusalem by an irresistible desire to be taught God's Law so they may walk in his ways. And God shall judge between the nations and turn their weapons into ploughshares of productive and peaceable work or shalom, and not learn war.

Many Christians feel homeless, defensive, angry, and fearful, with Christendom falling like the Twin Towers. But we forget that those towers were like Babel (Gen 11) – monuments to a monism of Money. Get back out there shopping, George W. Bush said on c. 11/11 to the US, to flaunt their freedom in the terrorists' faces. Fighting fruitless wars turned more people from Christianity and led to less freedom of religion in Iraq and Afghanistan, and later Syria. It gave ammunition to terrorists and atheists alike, the latter equating violent Islam with Christianity in the popular mind.

What did Paul say and do? He shifts from *home ground*, arguing Scripturally in Jewish Synagogues of Thessalonica (mixed response vv. 4-5), Beroea (eager response v.11) and Athens (v.17-18 curious response) to *away ground* in the marketplace (agora) for arguing/dialoguing (Cf Acts 19:9) with Epicurean (sensual - friends and food) and Stoic (rationalist and naturalist) philosophers.



## 2. Connection (common ground in Creation) - vv.19-28

So the philosophers take Paul to be tried at the Areopagus court, like Socrates (5C BC), for Paul's strange new gods Jesus and Anastasia, mistaken as a possible female consort and god of resurrection (!). They also do this to make sure Paul is not guilty of corrupting or endangering the youth, like Socrates was suspected to be.



This is like Christian schools are sometimes judged today – sprouting ‘heresies’ that there are just two sexes, by not going ‘all the way with LBG’-TQIA (misspelling deliberate). Christians are seen by some as converting children away from the natural religion or unlimited gender agenda/shopping list of consumer-choice of your preferred pronouns, even in primary school. As long as it’s not celibacy or heterosexual monogamy (‘suppression’) or waiting or refraining from transitioning. Quick conversion is required by the more ideological. (Please note I’m not

arguing that some careful transitioning may be the best of the tragic options in rare cases, and that the people, not the condition (as implied in the name gender dysphoria, should be always affirmed as loved by God and us).

In Victoria, the recently passed Suppression and Conversion Therapy Legislation decrees that choice, consent or conversion only runs one-way – if you’re wanting to transition *from* heterosexuality – not towards. And you can get 10 years or \$50,000+ fines if you’re in a formal professional role and cause psychological harm. But there’s lesser, though serious consequences and possible separation or re-education for informal influencing, even if you’re the child’s parent.

Even if someone’s a consenting young adult, and has taken the initiative to explore some of the ambiguities of intimacy, with a counsellor, youth worker, chaplain, these sensitive situations are no place for the studded boots of the Nanny State. The great one-word moral rationale for the Sexual Revolution since the sexy 60s, ‘Consent’, ironically is only allowed one-way – towards trans conversion, but its highly coerced conversion by some professionals and the power of online peer review, on what’s a deeply scientific and legally contested phenomenon. The Victorian legislation treats kids as adult sexperts, and consenting or questioning adults, as kids.

Back to Athens and Paul. Unlike our English guest preacher at Ridley who said Paul insults them as very *superstitious*, which he simply couldn’t have gotten away with in the volatile context, he connects with their ‘very religious’ seeking, through their statue to ‘an unknown God’. But he then *subversively* reveals God to them as origin and over-Lord of the whole Cosmos of Creation. God who needs nothing, is utterly unconfined - not enshrined by humanity, in some enslaved, hand-made or jerry-built shack, not fed nor served (cf Genesis 1-2, where God does the sustaining and feeding, unlike the ancient, hungry, needy gods). But God is the Supreme source of life and the very breath of creation, not a clockwork, mechanistic, distant god, but God the nearby, Intimate Interventionist. God who made us from one blood/ancestor, within his providential boundaries of time and space, ‘the theatre of his glory’ (Calvin), a stage for us to seek and live in Him as Father, ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’.

In this Paul cites their poets and possible Stoic sources, knowing them better than they knew themselves. No straw men here, but the very best of their thinkers. Paul connects with and commends their divinely inclined desires or in Calvin’s terms ‘testimony of the Holy Spirit’, God’s Creator Spirit.

### Singing a Different Song to the Stoic Peter Singer

But how would Paul address the Stoics’ philosophical descendants of today who would rationally steel themselves against feeling, in order to suicide? Someone like the great Australian atheist Peter Singer – a rationalist, naturalist, euthanasia/assisted suicide-supporter, animal-lover. But a ‘man without a chest’, or heartfelt emotion, using C.S. Lewis’ term for rationalists in *The Abolition of Man*.

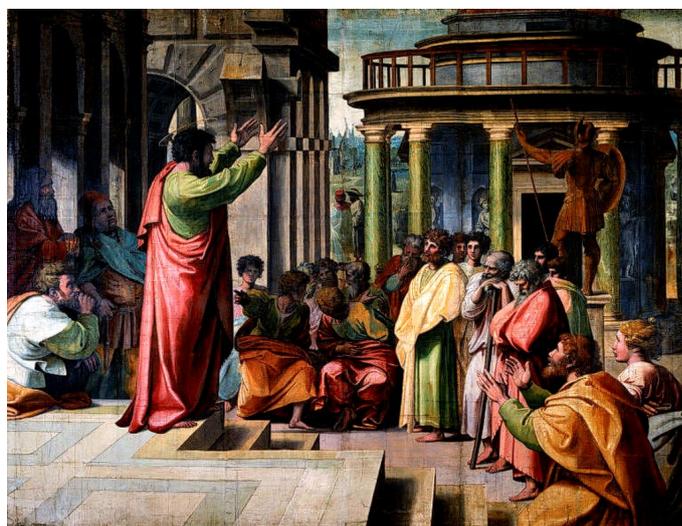
I decided in 2017 when I debated Singer at Newington College before 300 philosophy and ethics school-teachers, that I'd not play him on his strong-suit of logos or rationality, though I did push the great utilitarian, consequentialist philosopher hard on the logical slippery-slope consequences of voluntary euthanasia that there are no limits to the lawless consumer's will until the I has consumed itself. And that there's in principle no stopping making euthanasia available for anyone who wants it, at whatever age, as cowboy euthanasia veterans of Belgium, Holland and Canada steepen the slope.

But I began and ended with *pathos* – passion or feeling, best expressed in jokes and story. Why should the euthanisers have all the good stories – of dreadful, tortured, undignified deaths? The debate title was 'Should the rest of Australia follow Victoria's Assisted Dying legislation'. I was for the negative. So I started by saying 'Hi. I'm from Victoria, where we now advertise ourselves as See Victoria and Die!

I finished with a personal story about Assisted Living, of my Dad's death a year or so before, at 89, at a wonderful Catholic nursing home Stella Maris (Star of the Sea) in Cronulla, in the PM's electorate. He could go there after watching the Sharks. I call it my Sound of Music argument against euthanasia. Besides daily mass which my Protestant father received, and their quality physical and pastoral care, they'd regularly put on the tape I gave Dad of older people's favourite hymns and readings right up till his last day when I sat for a few hours and sang along.

But one day they put on the Sound of Music for and *by* the residents, not a video, nor staff performing. No, they had their own band of patients and residents playing Maria and the Captain, with black garbage bags for residents acting as nuns in habits. And they had families and the local Catholic school kids from c. 6<sup>th</sup> grade. There was a wonderful thankyou speech by one girl, and then they all went around speaking to the overwhelmed oldies. It was Catholic education at its very best, from womb to tomb, with no generational divide, a form of *assisted living* that is one of the best arguments you could have against assisted dying – largely due to loneliness of lack of care. I saw some smiles and maybe tears around the Newington audience, and sat down. The personal pathos had gotten through, thanks to the ethos/character of that stellar and graced last place for Dad, in Cronulla.

When we speak publicly we need pathos, ethos, and logos for true and complete communication, particularly to break through the icy isolation that logos/reason suffers under weight of political power, party politics and money. When I tell people what I did until recently, combining parish ministry and public ethics, I say I'm basically a public pastor. I go for the heart as well as the head.



### Jill Hennessy – Architect of Assisted Dying and anti- Conversion Therapy Legislation

Let me give you another example. A year earlier, when I was battling alongside others like ACL and doctors against the Assisted Dying legislation in Victoria, ten of us got half an hour with Health Minister Jill Hennessy. I got 3 minutes for 3 points:

1. Sorry to hear both you and Dan Andrews' have had parents die recently in distressing ways. (But I don't believe assisted dying is the way to relieve that distress or more broadly our denial of death which has led us to lock ourselves away in our island fortress as a hermit kingdom so it'll all go away. That's part of why Christ's resurrection is fundamental, because we haven't conquered death, we've just suppressed it).
2. You've met my wife Susan who trains carers in mental health when you introduced a session she ran in your electorate. She got into that work through us being carers for two adolescents who battled mental illness (now both married, doing well in their work with people with mental health issues, with three

grandchildren between them). But if they'd had Dr Philip Nitschke's euthanasia pills available online they might not be here.

Moreso, assisted dying or suicide legislation *authorises* adolescents or those with mental health issues in taking that last step. And we recognise that because whenever it's discussed on TV it concludes with 'if this report has disturbed you please contact Beyond Blue, Lifeline etc' – because we know that people are not atomistic individuals or billiard balls bouncing off each other, but intimately connected and influenced by social example.

3. A centre-left economic slippery slope argument. As a Labor voter I'm concerned at the increased privatisation and profitisation of aged care. (How much more now!). As Bill Clinton said 'it's the economy stupid!' or Follow the money. It's good you've given more money to palliative care, but if you're a profit-based aged care or hospital operator (even a relative waiting on the will) and you have a choice of reasonably labor intensive and hence relatively expensive palliative care or let them take a pill, what would you do?

What has happened is that in its first year ten times the expected or cited number of assisted deaths have occurred. And now there's calls for dial-a-death for remote candidates for assisted dying. That's some speedy slippery slope. In the other states' legislation they're dropping safeguards like the Olympic iceskaters before the last one standing, an Australian skater won. But in this case we, especially the vulnerable, will be the losers.

Again, I started with Context and Connection in 1 and 2 – through pathos, fellow-feeling or relationship, then some logical consequences to drive them towards some sort of Correction hopefully. Jill Hennessy also, more recently, was also the brains behind the non-consultative process for the anti-Suppression and Conversion Therapy Legislation. I wished we could have talked about that but no submissions were allowed.

### Human (including parental, refugee, children's and transgender) Rights

Sticking with Left or Labor politicians, (as Melbourne Anglican Social Responsibilities Committee Chair) I met alongside Archbishop Friere with Bill Shorten in his office the day before the Victorian State election in late 2019. I didn't tell Bill that the closest we'd been before was when I was singing-off-tune Gospel songs outside his Moonee Ponds office with Love Makes Away protesting his party's bipartisan barbarism toward refugees and asylum-seekers, especially children. (Something I've sought to persuade pro-family values ACL, with little success). Others inside prayed, risking arrest.

With the Archbishop we discussed Religious Liberty. Shorten got very animated at press reports that a country Christian school had expelled a young gay person who'd come out. I told him that there might be some fundamentalist over-reaction, but overall Christian schools are very professional and caring. And I told him of one I knew recently who were preparing safe-place protocols for a transgender student going on the school camp.

We then, from a Labour rights perspective, talked about rights to free association for churches and unions in Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* encyclical in 1891 (the basis for Australian industrial relations for a century from 1907). He said too that parents had rights to send their kids to schools who support their religious standards. This is what can be achieved starting from a shared human rights approach, something Sydney Anglican and Catholic churches shot themselves in the foot on in PM Kevin Rudd's time when Father Frank Brennan sought to establish a national human rights and responsibilities framework.

### Deep Multicultural and Inter-Religious Issues.

Another way I seek to operate in imitation of the multicultural Paul in a pluralistic, multi-cultural society is to turn pluralism against a narrow secularism or narrow Christian fundamentalism or intolerance. When I was Director at Macquarie Christian Studies Institute which taught fully accredited courses at Macquarie University (MCSI) in the noughties we had Bp. Tom Wright for a huge week. We'd open with our short promo that featured among others, a veiled Muslim student, with face showing, who said how she'd learnt from our education courses how to teach in a secular society setting.

Immediately a rumble of mumbling rippled around the room. My P.R. person told me we'll have to cut it. I said thanks but no, we're operating in a secular, supposedly pluralist, multicultural university. We need to show them we have an open, welcoming policy to all or no religions. But so some of my former Sydney Anglican clergy colleagues didn't get apoplectic or think we're heretics we put up the interview with an Indonesian woman who said in very faltering English, 'we were Muslim, we started reading Bible here, now we are Christian'. I think that satisfied them that we did seek to convert people in appropriate contexts (just as the Victorian Government wants to convert children to transgender).

I also taught Ethics at Macquarie School of Applied Finance with a largely international group of Masters' students. I've always regarded introductions as the key part of a course. So I and my Christian co-teacher explained where we come from, work and religion-wise and goals of course philosophically. We invited others to do the same and say why they chose the course and hoped to get from it. Most were fine but one older woman bluntly said she was an atheist as if 'don't try and convert me.' Part way into the course she was fine but did put a note in her evaluation questioning religious input.

I then thought what if our superiors questioned our open Christian and ethical approach in dialogue with other views? And I decided my defence would be a deep or thick multicultural one. After I mentioned Muslim banking one Muslim student mentioned to the whole class how her husband was in finance but found it really hard being unable to mention it or relate his faith to it e.g. Islamic banking.

I added an appreciative chapter on Muslim banking by Christian economist friends to the reading list but thought if the Atheist protests to the authorities I'll mention this episode of the Muslims feeling secularly silenced now being able to speak from their perspective and other students needing to hear that as part of their professional practice. Secular atheism might be growing in the West, but globally Atheism is in big trouble and religion is going gang busters - *God is Back*.<sup>1</sup> The course lasted 10 years with good numbers. And today, as I'm writing, I've received an email from a former student of eight years ago wanting to explore a PhD on Applied Finance and Theology. It made my day.

### National Curriculum Indigenous History Issues

What about the ongoing Australian Curriculum controversy in *The Age* on May 1, p.6? 'Tudge Concern over First Nations Focus'. Minister Tudge, a Catholic, 'affirmed more emphasis on Indigenous history' but wanted 'more balance, not a zero-sum competition dishonouring our Christian or Western history, which has made us the liberal democracy we are today'. It sounds like he's been reading the brilliant book *Dominion* by sympathetic agnostic ancient historian Tom Holland. Holland stresses the Christian roots for so much of modern society, even the most seemingly woke aspects like feminism. The CEO of Catholic Schools NSW, Dallas McInerney challenged assumptions seeing 'Australia's Christian identity being heritage and past tense. It's even worse that the whole reference to Christian heritage has been taken out of the [Civics] syllabus.'<sup>2</sup>

Australian Christian Schools Public Policy Director Mark Spencer was balanced and wise regarding the need for a both/and approach and taking time 'to consider the proposals as a whole rather than react narrowly to the phrase "Christian heritage"'. Barry McGaw, former National Curriculum Chair and winner of Ethos' Faith and Work Award, spoke at the time of Christians sometimes expecting special deals from him as a Christian but being given short shrift if the argument lacked merit.

One approach I'd suggest is to note, at least to yourselves, that this is not a zero-sum game, For instance, Aboriginals are the largest Christian group in Australia by far proportionately, and wonderfully forgiving. The following examples each illustrate well the religious depth of multiculturalism: The movie *Sweet Country* by Warren Thornton displays this beautifully, for all its tragedy. As Paul says in *Athens* and former Zadok Director John Harris uses as the title of his wonderful history of Aboriginal and white Christian interaction, we are all from 'One Blood'.

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<sup>1</sup> *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge 2009, written by two global demographers.

<sup>2</sup> It was moved from Year 8 to a more foundational role in Year 7, as the CEO of ACARA explained at the CSA conference.

We can say that not only in terms of creation but redemption too. We must also say clearly with Harris, former Zadok CEO that *We Wish We Did More*, as his history of CMS mission in the Northern Territory is entitled.<sup>3</sup>

Besides international and national educational expert Barry McGaw above, another great example of a Christian educator is Mark Scott, former Fairfax chief, ABC chief in torrid times, Head of the NSW Education Department, and now Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University, succeeding fellow-Christian Rev'd Professor Michael Spence. While no special favours should or can be expected, at least they understand where Christians and Christian Schools are coming from, and how to operate in a Christian influenced, pluralist educational setting.

### 3. Correction (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Jesus will Judge) – v. 29-31

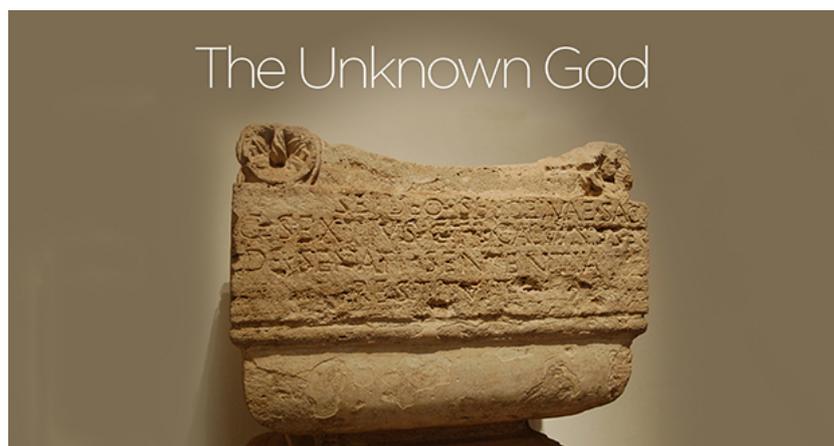
Judgement for Gentiles comes last not first. We are children not of a material or imag-inary god. God overlooked Gentile ignorance, but gives a second chance to all, all those under the damning verdict of death, to Repent, because he's resurrected the true human, Jesus, from the grave, the one who fulfils human cultural dominion in Gen 1:26-28, who has all 'dominion' or 'authority' in Mt 28:16-18 to rule and Judge the world truly, and in 1 Cor 15 and Hebrews 2 has dominion over all things, including the last enemy, death. Many Christians have been muzzled into not talking about death, to join the Great Denial, to cower before Covid-19, or been denied the final solace of a rousing Christian funeral. Though many have not let fear overcome them, and have led the charge against it. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is the great ground of hope by which we can 'hold the hope' during inhuman horrors.

We are caught in a pincer movement between the Resurrection and the Judgement, requiring repentance – 'turning' or in Covid-language, *pivoting* to God. Not in human power, but the power of the resurrection and the only power that brings final, complete Justice, and not just for us. My mentor Miroslav Volf writes eloquently against our liberal faculty common room timidity or embarrassment about Judgement. He asks if a non-forceful divine judgement would be any comfort to those where the original lectures behind his brilliant book *Exclusion and Embrace* were given, in war-torn Croatia in the 1990s. There, Croatia's villages and cities were pillaged, then burned and levelled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, ... fathers and brothers have had their throats slit and the topic of your lecture is God's perfect, non-coercive love which we should imitate'. This may work in the 'quiet of a suburban home'... but in a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, [the whipped and bloodied sabbath-less slaves who built the Egyptian pyramids, and the classical architecture of Athens and Washington, 'it will die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind' (p.304).

But please note: unlike John the Baptist, and even sometimes Jesus, Paul is addressing Gentiles not Jews who've heard the message for 2000+ years and therefore hear judgement and repentance– turn or burn, first not last, due to the times of ignorance (compare the statue to an unknown God), that God overlooks.

This is contrary to ACL CEO Martyn Iles' recent, albeit courageous and calm QandA appearance on April 8, where, admittedly after some discussion, its gay presenter Hamish McDonald, asked him (in a classic gotcha moment) if, given his support of what Israel Folau (selectively) said, the very civil, appealing, gay Liberal politician Trent Zimmerman, representing gays generally, was hell-bound? To which Martyn said Yes, as an expression of Christian love, 'We see you as souls to be saved?', i.e. from the Hell awaiting homosexuals.

There were other ways this could have been contextualised and reframed in the original 1 Corinthians 6 (and Rom 1:20ff) passage referring to several other non-sexual, middle-class sins and the offer of salvation accepted, in 'such



<sup>3</sup> Early 2020's Zadok Perspectives on 'Indigenous Faith' is also an excellent resource for schools. And a Christian musical study of the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir in the documentary *The Songkeepers* is uplifting and informative. As is the glorious mix of indigenous language and Gospel music in the late blind singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu's album *Gurrumul*, and others.

were some of you,' including repentant homosexuals now made holy in the Church. But Martyn's sincere motivation aside, it had, spoken directly to Trent Zimmerman, and indirectly to Hamish McDonald, the sound of instrumental, means to an end language for humans. It was distant and disembodied, untrue to the bodily resurrection of Jesus and that believers look forward to.

Several Evangelicals said they were positively surprised by Iles' preached the Gospel courageously. But to me, it was truncated and likely to be misunderstood as meaning that homosexual orientation, not even homosexual practice, is worse than other sins. One respondent in Eternity online even hoped that the strong audience applause for Iles showed some kind of cultural turning point, not a majority of ACL's well mobilised supporters. Instead, sadly, it merely reinforced the Culture Wars and the biblically unbalanced *fearful* identification of ACL Christians with Israel Folau (recently critiqued by a conservative Presbyterian pastor) and doubled down on in relation to Folau's latest attempt to play Rugby League, with his brother, though he is apparently contracted elsewhere.

What would I do or say instead of my English preacher's anger just after 9/11 or Iles' difficult situation? For what it's worth - just before Xmas 2001 I filled in for the then Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne on ABC Statewide TV with other heads of religion - Jewish, Christian, Muslim. I had a single one-liner I was determined to say. I was asked would there be closure from 9/11 at the end of 2001? I said no, but it's not that 'History changed forever with 9/11, as headlines kept saying, but that history changed forever on 12/25, Christmas,' or, I said looking at the shocked heads of religion, you might say history changed on your holy days. But we can disagree and don't have to shoot each other over it.' For Christians, as Herbert Butterfield the great 20<sup>th</sup> century historian said: Cling to Christ, and for all the rest be utterly uncommitted.' Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and the whole alphabet in between. That is the key to our public, political and educational stance.

### Conclusion – (Getting a Second Hearing) v. 32-33

Paul leaves the scoffers who clung to their dead idols, but others want more, and believe, including a judge presumably, Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman called Damaris, and others. Like the women witnesses to the Resurrection and the bulk of believers throughout history (c. 60% according to Tom Holland).

What does Paul's apologetic without apologising, say to us in our religiously conflicted, pluralist public context? Tell the truth, not in relativistic terms as 'my' truth, but not in absolutist, almost personal property like terms of 'The Truth', that I possess, as Iles' column by that name suggests over-simply and sometimes falsely, especially when labelling activist believers as 'cultural Marxists'.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, John 14:6 reveals the ethical 'way', the real 'truth' and the beautiful, vital 'life' that Plato spoke of as the good, the true and the beautiful, but only Jesus embodied, as he lived, died and rose for all willing to receive.

And lest you wonder why I've focused on Paul not Jesus, let me say that Paul's seeking a second hearing from Gentiles, is like Jesus in Mark 4 and elsewhere, speaking to many long-deaf Jews whom Jesus tested out with his parables with their surprise sting in their tail, to see if they were fair dinkum. As the great poet Emily Dickenson wrote - 'Tell the truth, but tell it slant.'

To the true seekers Jesus offered a second hearing explaining the parabolic mysteries of the kingdom to those open to being lifelong learners, i.e. disciples. That's what Paul the subversive did in Athens when truth was on trial. I commend it to you for contemporary Australian public communication and the preparation of students in Christian schools .

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance, of several columns, M. Iles, 'Don't be Deceived: you know the truth', in 'Voice for Truth', July 2020, 1. 'Movements' like 'Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, Climate Justice, Liberation Theology, and more'... 'have in their DNA ... Cultural Marxism.' While some examples can be found in these, it is misleading and massive over-generalisation to label the great bulk of people and Christians concerned about Climate Change (often quite conservative scientists). Or in the case of BLM/Racism that they've seen in citizen journalistic media e.g. since I saw Rodney King's bashing in LA in the early 90s videoed and then heard and saw the effects where I lived, or when I took the funeral in Malabar Anglican of a black indigenous man mistakenly killed by police in 1989.