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Across the centuries, religion and morality have been understood as cosy bed-fellows. However, to the critical observer, that relationship has long been problematic. At this point in history it is often difficult to make a defence of religion as a necessary and credible source of morality. A fascinating cacophony of cross-disciplinary voices has joined the debate about spirituality and morality. No less a figure than the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in his recent tome, *Faith in the Public Square*, makes an intellectually powerful case that society is the poorer for the demise of theologically informed contributions to social ethics. At the same time, Alain de Botton, a non-believing philosopher of culture, has published *Religion for Atheists*. He advocates the viewpoint that religion, minus its speculative attachment to things supernatural, has a lot to offer society, including nurturing a worthwhile sense of ethics. With an approach aimed at a younger, post-modern audience, is Peter Rollins, a prolific author of titles such as *How (not) to speak of God*. Another recent contribution comes from Richard Kearney, an Irish philosopher, whose *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* explores the curious possibility of religious sensibility despite theology. Perhaps these sentiments have inspired an initiative imported to Australia in 2013 called *The Sunday Assembly*. This is a gathering (or ‘church’) of non-believers whose website adopts a prescription most of us would endorse: “live better, help often, and wonder more.”

Meanwhile prominent atheists, led by scientist Richard Dawkins and philosopher A.C. Grayling, have waged a relentless onslaught against religious belief and the idea of a supernatural deity, with apparent disregard for the possibility of partnerships around common ethical causes even with those of religious allegiance. Their critique presumes that religion necessarily presupposes a ‘theistic being’, an ‘interventionist God’. But does it? Not in my view. Nor in the articulate expositions of many contemporary theologians. The discussion about theism is more complex than these pages will allow, and the conversation about the nature of God is not novel but centuries old. As a theologically formed ethicist, I need to ask: what might

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1 My use of capital ‘G’ God throughout has no theological significance. Rather, it is a matter of convenience.
a 'non-theistic theology' contribute to a shared spirituality and morality in the twenty-first century?

I write as one for whom the 'Jesus story' remains central in my beliefs – but not the deified Jesus of traditional Christology. Jesus did not say “worship me” but rather “follow me”. It is the Jesus way which matters. So, regardless of theology, I am happy to join forces with those whose ethical goals are similar to mine. I also speak as a male Westerner mindful of the fact that expressions of Christianity (and indeed of the other predominant monotheistic religion, Islam) vary across the globe; so, in parts of Africa for instance, expressions of Christianity are very different from those in European derived countries. In fact, in the South or Third World, far from dwindling, religious revivals are common. I also write for those in the Judaean-Christian heritage, like myself, who, while continuing to value that heritage, have a grave dis-ease with traditional Christian theology as well as concerns about the contemporary relevance of institutional religion. Various terms such as 'church alumni', 'post-religious', 'progressives', or 'emerging church' have been used to characterise this group. While none of these are really satisfactory terms, I adopt the label 'religious progressive' as the descriptor of this phenomenon.² A vast scholarly and popular literature has developed along with this movement in recent decades. Some of this literature explores the ethical implications of a progressive religious perspective, for example, Richard Holloway's Godless Morality. Another of the more catchy titles coming from the progressive stable is Michael Benedikt's God is the Good we Do while Greta Vosper's best seller of a few years ago, With or Without God, is sub-titled: why the way we live is more important than what we believe.

Ethics: with or without God is a text for a broader audience, the community of those who quest for the common good, whatever their faith or non-faith. Indeed, the case will be made for a shared ethic, and a convergence between so called sacred and secular values. This volume is intended to be a resource for those working to build a more just, global, human community and those whose ecological convictions commit them to the defence of life on Earth. In other words, the heart of this text is a call to practice eco-justice, nurtured in spirituality. Twenty-first century humanity faces enormous

²For an overview of the progressive movement see Webb (2012), chapter 11.
ethical challenges and it would be folly to sideline the great religious traditions and their institutions in addressing these challenges. At the same time, it is necessary to recover and discover a spirituality which will support us all in meeting these challenges, regardless of religious allegiance. *Ethics: with or without God* addresses the possibility of a spirituality and morality for today's world, and the deconstruction of traditional Christianity that may entail.

Progressive Christianity has tended to define itself in mainly doctrinal terms, establishing an identity by contrasting itself with the beliefs of others, and often overlooking ethics. Surely the greatest challenge for us progressives is to define ourselves through transformative action, not aimed primarily at a new reformation of Christianity for instance, but rather at the reformation of the society and cultures in which we live. In other words, the primary agenda for religious progressives ought to be a social ethical one, grounded in the simple reality that love and justice are at the heart of good religion and good ethics. Accordingly, those with a progressive faith, Christian or otherwise, certainly do not have a mortgage on what might be labelled 'progressive ethics'.

The place of religious progressives in Australian or New Zealand culture is unlike that of the United States. Manning Clark, Australia's foremost historian in the twentieth century, once described Australian society as "unique in the history of mankind, a society of men [sic] holding no firm beliefs on the existence of God or survival after death." I have long known that religion (including that of the self-styled 'progressives') is only shallowly rooted in Australian society, a fact borne out by successive polls. This contrasts with the religious culture of the United States. For me, as an Australian discussing the future of ethics, with or without traditional religion, this difference is pertinent, and certainly should be kept in mind by any North American readers.

What follows is a brief explanation of the background I bring to this task, to indicate the key influences in my journey as an ethicist and describe how my stance in social ethics has evolved.

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3 From Clark's *Selected Documents* as cited by Brennan (2007), 230.
I may never have written this book but for the fact that I am ‘a child of the sixties’. After a short stint as a high school teacher in western Queensland, I began my theological and university education in earnest, entering King’s College as a ‘fresher theolog’ [sic] in 1964. These were turbulent years around the world especially in university communities. The Vietnam War was the background for profound disenchantment with the institutions and moral foundations of Western societies. I joined the protests.

Theology and moral theology were not immune to this turbulence. With my colleagues I welcomed the new direction to applied theologies signalled by Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* which introduced those who would listen to the theology of Paul Tillich and the German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is noteworthy that I am composing this work in the year that celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of Robinson’s work which popularised and legitimised a radical re-appraisal of Christian theology that has gradually intensified in the decades since. In Christian Ethics, Joseph Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics* undermined approaches to religious ethics which followed a rigid ethic grounded in ‘divine command’. *Situation Ethics* argued for a contextual ethic based on the one moral norm, *agape* love. I became a convert. In 1969 I commenced studying Christian social ethics at Boston University School of Theology, the *alma mater* of Martin Luther King whose leadership of the civil rights movement as a Baptist pastor made him one of the heroes of my life. I graduated in 1972 with a doctoral thesis titled, *An ethical analysis of Australia’s Policies of Immigration Restriction (the White Australia Policy) and Development Partnership (Foreign Aid)*. My research gave me a precious opportunity to engage with the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, arguably the most influential Christian ethicist in twentieth century America. It was the activist example of Niebuhr, dubbed “a prophet to politicians”, which most impressed me.

There was another significant influence – an Australian one. That influence, triggered in the sixties, continues to bear fruit in this volume. I refer to Professor Charles Birch, a biologist from the University of New South Wales. In my undergraduate days I read Birch’s 1965 SCM paperback, *Nature and God*, which opened up a different way of imagining the divine, a way that was compatible with the evolution of life, drawing on process philosophy and an emerging process theology. I continued to nurture seeds of thought and spirituality planted by Birch. His credo is built around pan-
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enthism (a term to be explained in greater detail especially in Chapter Two). Birch’s philosophy and theology made more and more sense to me as concerns about sustaining Earth’s community of life came to the fore in my understanding of both ethics and theology during the 1990s. Birch was a lay theologian, influential in the World Council of Churches and also as an associate at Ted Noffs’ Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross. He continued to publish and develop process theology till his death. Charles Birch, who lived into his nineties, deserves more recognition in the Australian progressive Christianity movement than has hitherto been the case.

In 1973, informed by the previous decade of influences, I was Associate Minister in Methodism’s Central Church in Brisbane. At that time I read with enthusiasm a new book by Leslie D. Weatherhead, a much respected British preacher who had published many titles of his sermons; this new publication was titled, *A Christian Agnostic*. It was something of his personal testimony to what some saw as a radical theology. One Sunday evening, forty years ago, preaching in the Central Methodist Mission I addressed the sermon topic “Some things I can’t believe,” when, to the dismay and confusion of a few, I declared myself to be “a Christian agnostic”. At the time, my ministry combined the role of pastor and preacher with my involvement as a social activist. I embraced the challenging and revolutionary development of Liberation Theology which came from the Third World (as we referred to the struggling, poor post-colonial nations). This engagement with political issues coincided with the agenda of the ecumenical social justice group, Action for World Development, by then my employer. AWD was an offspring of the social justice emphasis spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In mid-life, this background was translated to the vocation of a ‘public intellectual; university teaching and researching in applied ethics, notably political ethics. Much in these pages was first developed in lectures and publications as an academic. As a university academic I wrote an introductory text, *Understanding Ethics* (first published in 1996, now in its fourth edition with Federation Press). That text was written explicitly for my teaching in a secular context, though some claim my theological inclinations are implicit in its pages. Whatever, the conversations generated around *Understanding Ethics* over the years have contributed to this volume.
Elsewhere, in *Beyond the Boundary: a memoir exploring ethics, politics and spirituality*, I have examined the times and events through which I have lived and worked. The narrative in that account demonstrates how my approach to social ethics has been to view ethics as an instrument of social transformation, a mission I exercised across the decades in a variety of roles. Initially I struggled with many of my elders in ministry to defend the claim that the Christian gospel requires action for justice and not simply personal conversion. I was still a young clergy person when I faced a deep and hurtful disappointment. Many of my fellow travellers in the Methodist church of my youth in Queensland rejected my ethical stance, especially when it challenged homophobia, racism, social inequalities or the political distortions of those who self-righteously claimed (often under a religious guise) they were the guardians of social morality. This realisation facilitated a more authentic vocational pathway: to join others, Christian and non-Christian, in the action for social transformation characterised by social justice and the dignity of all persons. It was this *common cause* and a common sense of injustice that bound us, not necessarily common *beliefs* or ideology.

Social ethics is an interdisciplinary engagement between moral philosophy and the social sciences, always, in my case, grounded in my theological formation. However, the return to academia gave me the liberty to reconstruct my faith and expand my understanding of ethics, especially to embrace the ecological concerns which have become so urgent in the twenty-first century. Along the way my spirituality was enriched by feminist viewpoints and the practices of Buddhism and Catholicism. Writing this book in my eighth decade gives me an opportunity to bring together these strands of my life’s work, gathering together my evolving understanding and commitment to religion and ethics. I intend to analyse what of religion (Christianity and traditional theism in particular) remains worth keeping in the quest for a common ethical vision and a spirituality for humanity in the twenty-first century.

This volume is a work of *social* and *theological* ethics, and only indirectly deals with *professional* ethics or *pastoral* ethics. Because many of its themes are dealt with broadly, some readers will be encouraged by this work to look for a more exhaustive treatment of certain topics in other texts. Some may expect I will attend to critics of my argument; there is little of this, my
purpose being to advocate my viewpoint, tested as it has been in a variety of ways. *Ethics: with or without God* is not intended to be a comprehensive academic text though it will not be out of place in academic libraries. Footnotes are extensive but abbreviated and no index has been provided. All sources referred to are listed in a comprehensive list of references. Readers may use this book as a group study or for personal study. Therefore each chapter closes with a few questions to encourage discussion and reflection.

*Ethics: with or without God* is in two parts. The first three chapters are more conceptual and theoretical than the remaining chapters. They address the main theme of the book while the remaining chapters are issues-based and applied.

The opening chapter introduces ‘ethics’ and ‘religion/spirituality’, analysing the debatable relationship between them with reference to contemporary issues. It also provides an overview of interfaith dialogue and its contribution to a shared ethic. This chapter introduces ethicist, Margaret Somerville and her views about the possibility of a shared ethic, religious or secular - views which are alluded to through other chapters. Chapter Two examines (within the framework of the author’s Christian origins) what kind of beliefs, or non-beliefs, best support a spirituality and morality appropriate for humanity in the twenty-first century. Chapter Three discusses whether, or in what sense, there is a Christian ethic, and what convergence there may be between that and a shared human ethic based on the idea of ‘responsibility’, one that will contribute to a twenty-first century global ethic. My intention is to contribute to the quest for a twenty-first century global ethic.

Chapter Four addresses sex and politics, themes which have a high profile in contemporary society. This discussion sits alongside the key ethical norm, love. The place of ethics and religion in public discourse is also considered. Chapter Five develops the idea of a global ethic and global citizenship by drawing especially on the eco-justice vision of *The Earth Charter*. This chapter has a more extended discussion of the moral dangers confronting life on Earth, realities which background the whole book. Chapter Six, as its caption indicates, is focussed on reflection about developing an ethical life. It draws on *The Charter for Compassion* associated with Karen Armstrong. The Epilogue which follows is developed as a letter to my grand-children.
For consideration:
What questions or clarifications does this Prologue raise for you?
What expectations do you bring to reading this text?
Are there points of convergence or divergence between your experience and that of the author which might impact on you as you read this book?