

Our Civilisational Moment

To Heraclitus, life is flux, change is the only constant. If the truth of this seems obvious in theory, making sense of it in practice is hard. For example, Australia's future is uncertain because the geopolitics of its post-war prosperity has changed. Its citizens are increasingly dependent on government welfare—our version of America's New Deal and Great Society—and we are managing the unwanted effects of the sexual revolution, the big lie that anyone can do anything—sexually—without fiscal costs or moral consequences.

How will all this be paid for in an age of uncertainty? Since Whitlam, government has assumed responsibility for more of what happens between cradle and grave, which requires a large bureaucracy to support the machinations of an unelected administration (which some call a deep state). There are competing priorities. The cost-of-living and housing crises must be solved, the NDIS might soon cost more than Medicare, and retirement incomes must be guaranteed, all while taxpayers are told they must fund policies to support the human rights industry and green energy transition. Older voters remember "It's Time", the slogan of the 1972 election. Since then, unsustainable mountains of debt have accrued. Does this matter?

Answers to questions of how costs will be paid and whether debts matter depend on the electorate's ability to understand reality—social, economic, moral. Again, older voters recall what happened to Whitlam, why his mandate to govern was revoked, why Labor lost the 1975 election. Resentment about this continues among those whose desire to reframe the Western metanarrative was thwarted, first by the failure of the Whitlam experiment, then by the republic referendum of 1999, then by the Voice referendum of 2023. If reframing the Western metanarrative is so important, surely a consensus about the reframing is required. What is wrong with our metanarrative? Why must it change?

Postmodernists reject the idea of metanarrative. They do not believe there is a grand story that gives meaning to all other stories, no sacred drama of which we are part. That is their ideological extension of modernity's critique of classical and romantic attempts to project colonial Western narratives on a landscape thought to be *terra nullius*.

Our constitutional system is a metanarrative. The Fathers of Federation made it resilient, difficult to change, able to resist potential threats. Modern and postmodern critiques are irrelevant here, because the system is neither classical nor romantic. It has been called Judeo-Christian, which is true, but this has tended to infer the Christian without its proper link with the Judeo. The tendency began when Christianity began seeing itself as independent of Judaism rather than organically related to it.

In Christian apologetics, it is first seen in the second-century theologian Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, where a fictional rabbi is invented for rhetorical purposes. Justin assumes Christ is *Logos*, a Greek term he presumes Trypho is unaware of, hence Jews are not Christians. If much anti-Semitism originates in this logical fallacy, it is never wise to presume Jewish unawareness.

In biblical studies, it is seen in higher criticism's desire to discover the world behind or beneath the text and withhold assessment of the text's truth claims until the hermeneutics are complete. The problem here is that the text is all there is to work with; the Bible's truth claims do not exist apart from the text. Searching for the historical Jesus, apart from the text's testimony about him, is pointless. There is no Jesus behind or beneath the text. Jesus fulfils the Hebrew scriptures as he understood them. So, the Christian testimonies about Jesus are *only* true if the Hebrew testimonies about the God of Israel are true.

It is of course contentious to say the Bible is *only* true because its testimonies are true. This challenges those who demand proof from outside the

Bible, or are taught to distinguish between fiction and fact, story and history, or whose worldview is tied to exegetical tradition—Catholic or Protestant—rather than to the Bible itself. It will also challenge those who believe all religions are the same, or that the so-called Abrahamic monotheisms are equivalent. The latter belief ignores hard objective fact: the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is different from the relationship between Christianity and Islam, and, despite our inclusive multicultural moment, Islam tends to be excluded from the idea of a Judeo-Christian civilisation.

Within Christianity there is also the law of human nature—natural law—fixed in the nature and structure of reality itself, by which moral behaviour can be deduced from reason apart from biblical revelation. The Scholastic version of natural law—Thomism—is a philosophical way of understanding God’s plan for us, built into our nature by the act of creation itself.

With the arrival of philosophical modernity, natural law was challenged on several fronts: existentialism’s quarrel with essentialism, the emergence of dialectical materialism, Cultural Marxism’s immanent critique of transcendence and reason. Any uses of the terms “nature” or “natural” are now problematic, particularly in relation to the ideas of human nature and human morality. Those who wish to be thought “scientific” avoid the naturalistic fallacy: the idea that “what is” in nature is “what ought to be”. Now that natural law has been abandoned in favour of Hegel’s version of Heraclitean flux and Nietzsche’s will-to-power, the only thing left for those with a believing loyalty to Christ—in a civilisation that still identifies as Judeo-Christian—is to understand biblical revelation on its fundamental level of narrative meaning.

This is where believing loyalty to Christ confronts the crisis of our civilisational moment. If “what is” in nature is no longer a measure of “what ought to be”—if nature is no longer deemed to have its own laws, if natural law has been superseded by positive law (the law of legal precedent, which has already ruled contrary to natural law in many jurisdictions)—then humans are free to redefine the nature and structure of reality, and the central idea of Judeo-Christian civilisation can be ignored with a clear conscience.

One example is the “What is a woman?” dilemma. If human sexuality is no longer grounded in biological reality, because biology and reality have both been relativised by modern/postmodern revisions of pre-modern worldviews, we are now hostage to the hubris of believing we can reframe the metanarrative, like Icarus flying too close to

the sun. This is the poisoned well of the sexual revolution.

Another example is the “Who is Christ?” dilemma. For centuries he has been understood in negative terms—what Protestants believe is wrong with Catholic theology, what Catholics believe is wrong with Protestant theology. Then there are progressive attempts to make him either a hero who solves whatever is wrong with the body politic or make him irrelevant to Western civilisation entirely.

When Justin linked *Logos* to metaphysics, he made the Church’s theology seem a Greek philosophical invention. In fact, there is nothing about the Church’s creeds or dogmas that is not grounded in the Bible. The stories about Jesus are true *because* the stories about Israel’s God are true. Jesus fulfils the Hebrew scriptures as he understood them. The early Christians recognised this clearly—that Jesus is a true story fulfilling a true story—much better than we do.

Listening with first-century ears is difficult for those with no sense of the Bible’s symbolic worldview. In our century, many if not most believe it represents ancient superstition, irrelevant to us because we have evolved beyond it. When Justin imagined Trypho for rhetorical purposes, he was revealing the zeal of a convert trained in Greek philosophy rather than Hebrew narrativity, in believing the New Testament superseded the Old Testament rather than fulfilled it. But supersession and fulfilment have opposite effects.

Jesus is to Christians what Torah is to Jews. In Matthew, he says he has come to fulfil Torah, not to abolish (supersede) it. He was a rabbi steeped in Torah who had a dialogical relationship with it. Problems arise when this dialogue is taken out of context or Christians try to make it about something other than the Bible’s textuality.

Christian apologetics should focus on the narrative unity of the Old and New Testaments rather than the truth-claims of one over the other. Whataboutery is a bad substitute for learning to read closely. The sad tradition of being unable to speak a truth about Jesus without bearing false witness against Judaism must be avoided at all costs. The truth about Jesus can never be a lie about the Jews (including the Pharisees).

The truth is told in the corroborating testimonies of many New Testament authors. This truth is expanded in systematic theology, where there is always the risk of linking Jesus with the God of philosophy rather than the God of the Bible. When the Bible is read closely, it reveals a coherent, unified story about fulfilment rather than supersession.

Jesus fulfils Torah. When challenging the Jewish authorities, he always reached beyond them, past the Law, back to the story of the beginning in Genesis.

In *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967) Paul Ricoeur demonstrates the uniqueness of the Adamic myth, compared with other creation myths. It distinguishes the origin of good from the origin of evil, making good prior to evil. In the biblical account of creation, God is good, humanity is made in God's image, and evil enters the world *within* human agency. Conversely, the other creation myths narrate the origin of evil *before* human agency. So, the Adamic myth gives humanity more power to act than other myths where good and evil are coextensive. From this it may be concluded it is better to have the Adamic myth as the informing principle of a Judeo-Christian civilisation than the creation dramas of Greek Theogony—Homeric and Hesiodic—or those of ancient Mesopotamia. (Also, there is the vast difference between giving your heart to Israel's God and giving it to the Aztec gods.)

In the Bible, evil first appears in the human story as a cunning serpent—the talking snake—who tells Eve nothing bad will happen if she eats forbidden fruit. She shares the fruit with Adam, they lose their innocence, are expelled from the Garden, and toil, pain, and death enter the world. The story implies they had free will which they chose not to use.

By the sin of Adam and Eve—symbolic first parents of humankind—the whole human race fell from primordial innocence through a failure of free will. From this, Christians deduced a doctrine of original sin which each person inherits as part of the human condition. They believe Christ takes away this original sin—by what he accomplishes on the Cross—and restores humankind to its Edenic state. It is of course possible to deny this understanding of the story, but it cannot be turned into a different story.

The corroborating testimonies about what led to, occurred during, and happened after Jesus's crucifixion inform the Christology of the Church one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Their central message is that Christ conquered—"once and for all upon the Cross"—the "principalities and powers" behind the talking snake, thereby offering human-

kind a *soteria* (wholeness, deliverance, preservation) otherwise impossible. They describe Jesus winning a spiritual war against the powers of darkness within the Bible's symbolic worldview, its cosmological sense of celestial hierarchies, fallen angels, divine council, and the Day of the Lord. The role of Christian tradition is to preserve this context.

It is neither Gnostic nor Manichean to see evil everywhere, nor is it anti-humanistic. The cunning serpent is still whispering that nothing bad will happen to us if we eat forbidden fruit: our eyes will be opened, we will be like God, knowing good and evil. One of the terrible results of Freudian and

Jungian metapsychology, which invented and systematised the unconscious in erroneous ways—was to make evil seem good and vice versa. Making Satan a hero who drives the narrative forward—in a *felix culpa* way—is to rewrite the story to suit romanticism. The West cannot survive such whataboutery. Evil cannot be heroic.

The problem with progressive Christianity—and the success of positive law at the expense of natural law—is a desire to interpret the Bible in ways which protect the institutional power progressives have achieved since the sexual revolution (and to further their ideo-

logical goals). One tactic is to declare anyone who claims literal rather than metaphorical belief in the Bible a fundamentalist who must be excluded and ignored. But literal belief really means the Bible's stories are true. The Christian testimonies about Jesus are true *because* the Hebrew testimonies about the God of Israel are true.

At the end of John's Gospel, an insecure Peter asks the risen Christ: "Lord, what about this man?" of the disciple following them (the one whom Jesus loved). The risen Christ tells Peter to mind his own business: "What is that to you? Follow me!" So, Peter still did not understand the nature of discipleship, even after the bodily resurrection, but his understanding matured as he followed the risen Christ. This is also true of the other apostles. The Gospels studiously record their failure to fully grasp what Jesus had been telling them, a sign of the text's authenticity.

It is traditional to assume they misapprehended his messiahship. It is commonplace to say Israel was expecting a different messiah, one who would restore its earthly glory (despite Jesus saying his kingdom was not of this world). It is harder to accept

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a messiah who triumphs over sin and death—who restores what was lost in the Fall—within the symbolic imagination of Jews in the first century, but we can only interpret what the text is saying and doing.

The identities of what we now know as Judaism and Christianity took their current shape—with an eye towards each other—after the Bible took final form. The Rabbis shaped Judaism; the Church Fathers shaped Christianity. Both traditions interpret texts they did not write. The Rabbis did not write the Old Testament, the Church Fathers did not write the New Testament.

It is to be hoped Christians have moved beyond the anti-Semitism inherited from Justin Martyr, which was unbiblical in any event. Christians must maintain a believing loyalty to Christ that does not define itself in negative terms, particularly terms that bear false witness against Jews. It is also to be hoped Jews maintain a believing loyalty to the God of Israel.

After the Second World War, Christian and Jewish relations entered a new phase in response to the Holocaust. The first statement of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), *An Address to the Churches* (1947), and the declaration of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (1965), recognise an urgent need to reverse the terrible consequences of anti-Semitism. Relations have improved—in unexpected and remarkable ways—but anti-Semitism continues in the twenty-first century, as a sin against God, a crime against humanity, and a danger to civilisation. Recognising this, the ICCJ issued *A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians* (2009). These documents are forceful reminders that the truth about “us” should never be a lie about “them” whether “they” are other Christians, other Jews, adherents of other faiths, or agnostics and atheists.

Since then, the relationship has fossilised into academic conversations as interlocutors focus on post-war progressivism rather than sacred texts. What is meant to be faith dialogue can seem more like talking points of the tenured; national socialism tends to be linked to political conservatism, conservatives are subliminally scapegoated, and it is presumed developments in secular culture are God’s will. Conferences take the form of an in-group, where those who believe in the Christian fundamentals are presumed to be fundamentalists (or worse, Trump voters).

One problem is that, by definition, Christians believe in Christ, while Jews are still Jews even if

they do not believe in the God of Israel or are anarchists or anti-Zionists. In this context, dialogue is not focused on the content of Jewish and Christian belief—what the Bible says and does—but always falls back upon the presumed historical errors of believing Christians. Things would improve if the dialogue focused more on the content of the biblical texts.

Now that those who believe the Christian fundamentals—biblical truth, Christ’s deity, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, physical resurrection, and bodily return on the Day of the Lord—are barred from cultural discourse, there are no conceptual terms to frame the current rise of anti-Semitism. While the evidence points to another source, we are so used to blaming so-called fundamentalists for everything wrong and dare not notice the obvious: Bible-believing Christians did not react to the evil terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023, by forming large sectarian groups chanting “From the River to the Sea”. This is our civilisational moment, which we have no way of discussing apart from the propaganda techniques of whataboutery, logical fallacy, and false equivalence. The problem is being unable to tell a truth about Palestinians without bearing false witness against Israelis.

As the narrative around our inclusive multicultural moment continues to face challenges—social, economic, and moral—the current federal government clings to power and needs every vote in electorates with large minorities, including those that are reflexively anti-Semitic. This puts Labor in a difficult position, as its desire to reframe Australia’s metanarrative—because *It’s Time*—has been a hardwired part of its platform since Whitlam. But now there is economic reality. The electorate has come to depend on high levels of government welfare, and the geopolitics of globalisation, which benefited Australia immensely, has given way to the geopolitics of deglobalisation, which is another matter altogether.

In our civilisational moment, Australia needs a clear vision of its history’s light and dark aspects, its present, and its future. It is not enough to expect the Magic Pudding to finance the socialist visions of the Australia desired by *It’s Time* cadres. Most important, if Australia still claims to be part of a Western Judeo-Christian civilisation, it will have to grasp what that means, really.

*Michael Giffin is an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Sydney. His latest book, *Interpreting Literary Texts: A Post-Kantian Approach*, was released in September 2024 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.*