

Ambitious Transcendence



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***Spooner Dodd Consulting Services
Post Office Box 462
EDGECLIFF NEW SOUTH WALES 2027
A U S T R A L I A***

maxdodd23@gmail.com

(+61) (0) 410 940 183

Let us begin...

What follows is a series of essays that I put together at the end of 2013. I had found, somewhat to my surprise, that I was able to express my own deep sadness that the spiritual experience to which Christianity should be taking individuals had been so distorted in the name of an unavailable religious truth and the desire for an unavailable certainty. I saw a forensic precision being pursued which bore no relation to reality. I felt compelled to find words for my experience and what follows is the result of the pondering in question.

As you will read in the small work, there are those who are *ambitious* to lead lives that reflect the immensity within them in all areas of experience, spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical. They are the individuals who have truly lived and whose experience of life is the standard for others to follow. I am sure that this challenge to wholeness however demands qualities of courage and vigour that are only rarely given. The question for the reader is whether you are one such. If you are, this small work is guidance on fulfilled living of a quality that is worthy of the champion.

Many will find what I have said insulting of conventional Protestant and Reformed Christianity and be strong in their criticism of my lack of faith as they would see it. They may even feel offended or affronted by what I am saying and I shall accept the fact. I shall however ask those who may find what I have said difficult to accept or worthy of denial to remember that the following essays spring from my concern that the larger world sees Christianity to have died and to be an irrelevance to a fully developed life. I share the view of my own critics that we are seeking to ensure that the message of Jesus is brought in all its daily significance to a troubled world and that men and women find life easier and more complete by finding their spiritual lives. I ask my critics to remember that I am on the same side as they are.

To those who may as a result of what follows find that their own spiritual questioning is supported by one who finds comfort in the journey of the soul touched by the wisdom of the man of long ago Jesus, I offer my deepest prayers for the success of your enquiries and your meeting the richest personal experience in discovering your spiritual dimension.

Read on and be deeply blessed and be part of an effort to bring the Jesus of the Gospels for all our relatively little knowledge of Him to men and women and for them to find in their spiritual lives the wholeness and comfortable living to which they aspire.

A Plea for Spiritual Ambition

I go to church services and find that I am called upon to accept a structure of belief that I find far beyond me. We are told that God is somewhere in heaven and that Jesus (He was known to His own as “Joshua” or “Yeshiva”) ascended there forty days after He rose from an empty tomb – an event that had followed His crucifixion some three days before (by Greek chronology if not by ours). We even assert Creeds (Apostles’ and Nicene) as part of a service. I confess that apart from the opening declaration of belief in God, I am silent.

Access to the God of the Universe (I am totally unsure of how to put words to something so large as to be utterly ineffable) is offered as though that access were conditional upon the reality of the events in question – principally that the death of the Jew Joshua on a Friday in possibly April 30 A.D. represented some sort of cosmic act of propitiation to a hard God Who had called for the largest of all sacrifices – His own Son. Modern man finds this, if he thinks about it at all, absurd and promptly dismisses religion and Christianity in one breath as nonsense. “Man come of age” to cite Bonhoeffer sees it all as something of little meaning to him. Our forebears went to church as part of a social and cultural process where religion was unquestioned and its application to an ethical life essential: modern man sees this to be preposterous. Christianity is irrelevant. But, for us, the question remains, “Is it?”

All that follows is a plea from the depths of my being to the church in 2014 to be more sensitive to the doubts of so many who have, so to speak, thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

Christianity has in the last 200 years undergone a major process of having had its apparent fundamental tenets attacked and rejected by modern rational man. The structure of a “three tier” universe of heaven up there, the earth here and hell underneath has long gone to the very perdition it presented. Men and women have found the whole Biblical account (and especially the accounts of the life of Joshua set forth in the four canonical Gospels) specious and unreliable and have rejected all its guidance with the skill of reformers. And yet for all the challenges that can be made both within the community of the believers and far outside it to the canon of the Gospels, modern churchmen and women seem more willing to accept myth as fact with a renewed vigour. The defence of the Gospel is now a matter of presenting it as though it were “the Word of God” and beyond challenge – “inerrant” is a term that frightens me enormously – it is literally true. I

read that to many believers the final book of the New Testament, the Revelation of St. John, with its guidance on the “Rapture” is more important than the Sermon on the Mount. Appalling. This is the way of decline and failure – intelligent people just cannot accept such ideas.

I am persuaded without much effort that those who wrote the four accounts of the life of Joshua (and did so in the case of Mark well over 30 years after the Crucifixion and in the case of John, some 60 years or more later) were singularly well intentioned in what they did but they all had what would be called today a “target audience” and a view to present that distorted the tale to the point where as history the Gospels are essentially unreliable. As myth and poetry, they are excellent – the Joshua of the “Sermon on the Mount” offers a spiritual wisdom of universal beauty and impact – though to suggest that it is possible physically to locate the place where He made such a presentation is preposterous. I smile when I remember hearing one of the modern liberal theologians mentioning that Irish nuns used to offer their students a validation of the compilation of the Gospels by suggesting that His disciples had notebooks and were taking down His statements as though they were his secretaries. If only... It is this measure of absurdity that has brought the living Gospel into such dishonour and such disrepute. Its rejection becomes yet easier for a world trained in rational thinking and presentation. The “empty tomb” is a further example of a vast overstatement. The practice of the day was that a crucified villain would be taken immediately on death to a pit and his mortal remains would be simply thrown in for the benefit of the local vultures as his body deteriorated. To suggest that this did not happen to the “Joshua” of the Crucifixion is to give events colour that they simply neither need nor have. There is the question of the length of Joshua’s ministry – was it one year or was it three and where exactly did He walk – was it all in the northern part of modern Israel around the Kinneret with a final journey to Jerusalem probably along the route now numbered Highway 90 along the Jordan valley beside the frontier between modern Israel and Jordan with its endless fields of land mines? Did Joshua marry – was He sexually experienced – did He know physical human love at its richest – was His birth the outcome of some extraordinary intervention or was He the son of committed parents whose shared love brought Him life? All manner of questions arise and the answers to those questions only seem to make those who would wish to see the wisdom of Joshua offered in terms of the “religion” of Christianity all the more desperate to present a vision of Joshua as though what we are told is literally true and certain.

All that has been just said will suggest to many churchmen and churchwomen that I am possessed of a diabolical capacity to doubt and that

what I think must be entirely and immediately rejected as heresy and apostasy. Please give my ideas the dignity of continuing to read them – I am as interested as you are to see the Christian Gospel lift lives and for people to discover their spiritual dimension and all that goes with it.

I accept that in the life of the man Joshua as the last of the great Jewish wandering guides (I am nervous of the word “prophets”) mankind saw a spiritual life of unimaginable beauty and power. That Joshua was the ultimate statement of spiritual integrity is perhaps a bridge too far, just as much as it would be to say this of either Mohammed or Siddhartha Gautama. That said, however, in the records we have of the life of the man, Joshua, we are seeing a vision of a spiritual life and wisdom of unimaginable worth which man has cast aside in the twenty-first century very much to his cost. The stories of the life of Joshua may not pass the tests of literal truth but as statements of rich spiritual wisdom they are second to none. And in rejecting the literal accuracy of these stories we are not rejecting their richer guidance nor are we seeking to reduce the measure of the wisdom of the Man.

When it is all said and done, however, the lessons of Truth are lessons of the significance of what the writers of the New Testament in Greek called “*agape*,” a word which has no English translation that actually fits it. Buddhism knows the quality of “compassion” – modern English does not do justice to the quality or measure of that word, either. Confucius spoke of what we would translate as “benevolence.” “Charity” and “love” are the two most commonly used translations for “*agape*” but neither embodies that dimension of ultimacy and intimacy connoted by the subtleties of the Greek. *Agape* is concerned with the other in the singular, on a basis of self-surrender and an endlessly authentic giving of one’s own being. One thinks of Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” thesis of 1923. It is the most dangerous challenge and the risks are huge – but the message of a deeply committed Christian manifestation is of total commitment to the other individual – what Bonhoeffer following Buber called in 1944 “the nearest *Thou* at hand” – unconditionally, and no matter how bleak may be the life to which one is giving oneself. We must follow the Benedictine precept of finding the Christ in the other.

Christianity, like all the great spiritual traditions, is concerned with finding an experience of Truth – of discovering that the Universal is available to us, for all our total inability to find adequate language for the Ineffable. I am reminded that to the Hindus the word for “the All” *Brahman* is linked with the inner core of the human expression of the Divine, *Atman* – they are one

coin of two sides. Perhaps this is the simplest statement of Truth that can be offered. This is, however, good Christianity. The pursuit of some form of forensically correct belief system is itself the true apostasy of our day and the source of the rejection of higher values that so distorts lives and brings such pain.

A More Abundant Life

I have recently completed writing a small work of essays called *A More Abundant Life*. The thrust of the work is my concern that fundamentalist “Bible believing” Christianity has made the guidance of the wisdom of Jesus unacceptable to modern man. As you will see, I regret this loss, though I have myself travelled a long spiritual road of deep blessing to a position that many may find difficult to recognise. I invite you to see a new vision of the man Jesus Whose wisdom I find easy to correlate with the good sense of practical Buddhism.

To me Jesus (“Joshua”) was entirely human and His death in no way was some cosmic act of propitiation to a God concerned with sin and man’s inadequacy. Jesus was a truly remarkable being possessed no doubt of all the qualities of the human and yet as close to the “perfect man” as it is possible to be in this life – so perfect indeed that it was possible for the Ineffable Eternal (I am avoiding the word “God”) to offer a universal wisdom through Him. We are challenged by Jesus to lives of simple “otherness” where the sole test of the development of our spiritual lives is the willingness to be at one with the other whoever he or she may be.

We shall find over the passage of the years and not even the months and certainly not the weeks that we have encountered a mystical consciousness of Presence that seems far beyond our rational or linguistic capacity of definition. We seem to have met however a subtle pervading Presence which has become part of our guided lives. We sense a source of deeper and enriching comfort and support, and we see its expressions in our daily lives. I am reminded that the former great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, observed that coincidences occurred in the lives of those for whom he prayed. That same subtle emanation, I submit.

For me this has had much to do with the spiritual guidance of Buddhism to seek in meditation a richer consciousness of that Presence. I see the notion of meditation however itself to be slightly tortured and to be perhaps too limited in its application. For me meditation and its companion contemplation connotes the daily practice of seeking inwards to find a deeper silence and a richer composure. Our lives find an order and balance (and empowerment and invigoration) that we may not previously have known. That meditators are usually shown in the so-called *asana* position is unfortunate as the experience of deeper inward travelling is a matter not of procedure but one of process. It is one’s journey *within*, within *one’s* own terms that matters, much as there does seem a commonality about certain of

its outward qualities. Silence, stillness, and the separation of the self from the stimuli of life seem essential but one's posture is of one's own choice. An outline of a straight back and as little pressure from clothing as possible and deepening physical comfort will always be a good beginning.

These essays seek to offer individuals an introduction to a spiritual experience of lifelong proportions of refreshing comfort and robust performance. Spiritually developed individuals are those for whom the rewards of a good life seem to come easily and naturally though this is not to suggest that the false gods of our age of materialism and consumerism are rewards for spiritual attainments. Material success is not necessarily for the spiritually enlarged – as I so well know. There is however a very real place in the world of commerce and industry for men and women of great spiritual development. That they have grown in what for others may be an unlikely area of experience will become evident in their greater personal attributes and their care for the human dimension of enterprise.

You are offered a very full life of deep satisfaction and riches that the material world may not accept. Try the practice of quietness and be ambitious for transcendence and find a life which acknowledges the absolute and unconditional importance of the other. You will become conscious that you seem to have touched (and be touched by) Something that will guide and protect as no other. Articulating that experience will never be easy for all that.

Blessings abound – seek them and be rewarded.

A Journey of Body and Soul

Between Thursday 6 June and Saturday 8 June 2013, I made what was to be an especially interesting bicycle journey along German riverbanks from Worms to Ludwigsburg (now a northern suburb of Stuttgart). In weather of increasing heat, I followed a Rhine in high flood south to its confluence with the Neckar just north of Mannheim and then I rode beside the Neckar, itself recently flooded, to Ludwigsburg by way of Heidelberg, Mosbach Neckarelz and Heilbronn. My night in Mosbach at a *Jugendherberge* in what had been a mill constructed at a sluice in 1475 was not to be forgotten. It was a journey I estimated to be of 250-260 km. with all the twists and turns of following cycle-tracks that were not always as clearly marked as they may have been but as a physical undertaking, it was a joyous experience.

What impressed the traveller about the journey was however something that was totally outside the conspectus of cycling for all the beauty of the forests and vineyards through which I passed. I had gone from the city where one great adventurer of the soul had made a declaration that has resonated around the world ever since to the place of birth and death of the first of the great modern religious questioners. I had gone from the city of the famous Diet of Worms where, on the late afternoon of 18 April 1521, Martin Luther had made his unprecedented announcement at great risk to his own safety "Here I stand, God helping me, I can do no other." I had on that second morning stood beside the memorial to Luther in a park in the middle of Worms and had been astounded to find his statue surrounded by those of other reformers, significantly Wycliffe, Zwingli, Calvin and Hus. The Protestant Reformation had begun and with it the ultimate expansion of the West into the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution and man's successful enlargement of the use of his environment. I arrived the day after at Ludwigsburg, the provenance of David Friedrich Strauss whose 1835 work *The Life of Jesus – Critically Examined* set off a theological revolution with his assertions that the Gospels were "mythical" and not factual and that they were to be read totally in their Jewish context. Though he was only 27 at the time it was to be his last appointment as a formal theologian and he was to be ostracised for the "wickedness" of his thoughts. It was the commencement of a theological revolution that has resounded to the present with the search for what is called "the historical Jesus." I might add that the fourth edition of his work was translated into English by no less a linguist than Mary Evans, better known as George Eliot, the writer of *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* and its publication in three volumes in 1846 in London was highly controversial. I had started with the location of one revolution and ended in the birthplace of the instigator of another one.

That the journey was itself “book-ended” by the places known for their associations with such revolutionaries of the Christian experience made me think again and again of the contributions made by Luther and Strauss to our understanding of Christianity. I am sure that in these days when so many are so unmindful of the historical events on which their religious lives are based, there was something especially significant in all of this. It particularly made me aware that in this ignorance lie the enormous problems of the Christian Church to present its message to a world and of the Church's coming to hold such a conservative (regressive, perhaps) attitude to what it offers. This is especially so in the context not of the denial of Christianity of which there is enough in the public forum but of the decline in the numbers giving public acceptance to Christianity. That many who seem to deny are probably not doubters but uncomfortable with what is on offer has prompted me to write of the question. A cycle tour in golden weather has had a much larger consequence than mere pleasure and good exercise.

I am aware too that there are many theologians and especially liberal and progressive theologians (those terms are not mine but I use them in the absence of something better) who see the world we inhabit in the early morning of a new century to be in need of a further Reformation, half a millennium after the last one. I am equally concerned that the fundamentalist wing of mainstream Protestant Christianity is in the ascendant, especially in the English-speaking West with its rapidly falling numbers of active participants. I am saddened that the message of what I see to be the common spiritual experience of East and West is all too easily lost in philosophical abstraction when better guidance is of immense daily practicality in the fulfilled life of the believer. Without being the exemplars of our message, we are its deniers.

My own experience has taken me a long time ago to the wisdom of the Buddha. I find in that teaching guidance on a wider sense of a directly involved Presence which is immanent as much as it is transcendent. It makes much as well of “compassion” and “fellow-feeling.” The day to day *conscious experience within* of something larger, however difficult the language by which one would wish to express it may be, suggests to me that there is guidance to be had on a perception of God in our daily lives that is the best evidence of the reality and meaningfulness of our faith. We are to be the manifestations of the presence of God – a God deeply within its universe – at one with all and of all. That the theologians use language which revolves around the forms of the verb “to be” is just. The essence of all that exists is present within us. It is in meeting that other on a basis that is open,

unconditional, trusting and equal that we find the confirmation of what we have discovered within.

Concerning ourselves with the apparatus of theology and the questions we seek to answer with it becomes an exercise in futility. To suggest this is not to be “anti-intellectual” but to see that the existential (mystical?) experience of the immanent presence within the universe of its Source is something so real that to seek to put words to it is indeed to reduce it – and to restrict it. I am struck dumb by the beauty of the simplicity of what is to be offered – just as I lose my voice in seeking to discuss all the confusion of thought that comes of asking endless questions to which answers are hard to find.

Belief systems become difficult to support and opposition to any idea becomes so fierce and personal that we forget that the origins of spiritual lives lie wholly in concern for the other and his or her equality with us. I see quibbles becoming more important than their purposes.

An Idea Worth Spreading

I have an idea so worth spreading that no-one bothers to do so. The idea is that in each one of us is the Divine – the Universe speaks in each one of us as Its own. Read on to discover how large you are.

To us has been given the greatest and most satisfying gift – Life – and we treat that gift so lightly.

A ministry of hope is a way of reminding men and women of their origins and all that they are. To do less is to deny men the chance to see themselves for all that they are and all that they can be. The substance is that you are a genius, a hero and one of enormous potential and that the world can be grateful that you were here.

For all that the truth is that we need constant reminding of our origins and of our greatness. The world has done an impressively capable job of diminishing you and taking from you your inner vision. We are here to remind you of who you are and where you could and should be.

Dream the largest dream – it is the empowered *you* in action and at *your* best. Go forward with all force and vigour – you are built to win and win well.

Ambitious Living

I have recently met a wonderful phrase which gives these pages their name. It suggested that those whose lives are complete in all the dimensions of body, mind, emotions and soul have *lived ambitiously*. I was struck by the adventurousness of this turn of phrase and was then charmed to read of those “who sought the frontiers of their humanity.” I appreciated again that this is totally in keeping with the message of life that I would see offered to men and women – and do not. *Living ambitiously* connotes a zest for a developed life – a life where all that is in the being has been touched and enlarged and applied to our nourishment and fulfilment. This means that the frontiers of our individual humanity have been well and truly explored and that we have dared to lead rich lives.

At this time as I write of the end of an old year and the commencement of a new one, I see this to be an especially appropriate message. I have spent a year with my own experience deepening substantially with new alliances and new contacts coming into my existence to provide it with refreshment and indeed enlargement and older ones becoming closer. 2013 was a year of growth of an inordinate kind but it was a year that made me all the more wary of the Christian fundamentalist position and its passion for certainty where exactitude seems to me to be entirely absent. It made me however more aware of the wisdom of Calvinism rather neatly summed up by a line from the early nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard (I am not sure that this particular definition is justified) that life is led forwards but understood backwards.

2013 reminded me with a new force that as I look back over 71 years I see a strange underlying wisdom of a transcendent provenance which seems to have guided and protected and further to have provided wisdom as the days have run their course. I see this as the nearest thing we have to some sort of “proof” of the existence of some Universal Source that is so utterly beyond our ability to define it linguistically that it is probably safer to speak simply of the “Ineffable.” And yet I see a design in my own existence that suggests to me that those moments of the numinous were genuine experiences of the Greater in Its universe dealing with Itself through Its human creations. I unhesitatingly use the word “mystical” (for all the dangers of misunderstanding) to identify those experiences. But it struck me very recently that the vision of the direction of my own existence now well over half a century ago (probably nearer 60 years or even more ago) was to discover the deepest and most continuing experiences of that Ineffable in Its relations with Its planet Earth and its inhabitants. I realise now (again as I

look backwards and with the appropriate understanding) that there has been an active wisdom that has been very much involved with me – and that its operations continue unabated but perhaps now better understood. None of this however means that I have found rational proof of the existence of God – I have not. I see however something (Something?) at work in my experience that is at once deeply loving and intelligent and startling in its power. I am happy to rely on Its provision and let It operate in my existence and through me in the life of the world around me unhindered.

The wisdom I am discussing is staggering in its simplicity. The Ineffable is met not with religious systems and elaborate theologies of doubtful measure but in the daily committed pursuit of the Immanent Transcendent by spiritual exercise and by finding equality with the other in the equally diurnal disciplines of what the New Testament calls *agape* and the Buddhist wisdom “compassion.” I gather that this gentle expansion of understanding could be seen to be a form of “natural theology.” Belief systems seem to diminish simplicity: this ever-enlarging and ever-enriching “natural theology” of inward search and outward self-surrender would say it all. As I have said earlier, the rather misunderstood word “mystical” very correctly comes to mind. God is an experience, and something much larger than a belief. No more to say.

That is the message to take out into a troubled world in a new year and beyond and the challenges and excitements to which a new year will guide.

Bravo – what a wonderfully happy and interesting new year it will be.

Spooner Dodd Consulting Services is an international operation that is the outcome of the life experience of Maxwell Dodd. Though he is Australian, he sees the wider trans-Atlantic world to be a better place to offer its wisdom. The operation has two homes, so to speak, one in the grounds of the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California, (north of the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin County and under the towering strength of Mount Tamalpais), and the other in the world of a small German Rhine-side village, St. Goar, named for a French-born hermit who died in 575 A.D., and who, though never formally canonised, is apparently considered the patron saint (*inter alia*) of boatmen, inn owners and brick-bakers.

Maxwell was born in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales in August 1942 in an Australian world of social and intellectual privilege and after a classical English education at one of Sydney's major schools, he had no trouble being admitted as a lawyer at 22 – he could not have been greener. He found after some years of ever-growing professional success and a hugely developing practice called M.A. Spooner & Dodd that he had wider gifts than those of the successful advocate that he was and that he was somewhat unexpectedly coming to be involved more and more in lifting the lives of those whose existence had avoided incarceration to some extent by his skills – and by their willingness to be open with him.

An odd valuable gift had to be explored and after many false dawns, he finally met in San Anselmo, his own great guide and encourager, the Revd. Dr. Warren Lee, who was in charge of doctoral programmes of the Seminary for those already ordained. His advice was that Max's vocation (he most certainly had one) and the ministry to flow from it was a ministry of hope. He would wander like a Buddhist *bodhisattva* and bring to the needy, the unhappy and the pained, the message of human potential in all its dimensions and especially the spiritual, and the healing of mind and heart to accompany it. That advice has proved utterly prophetic. What you have just read is that message distilled in all its simplicity.