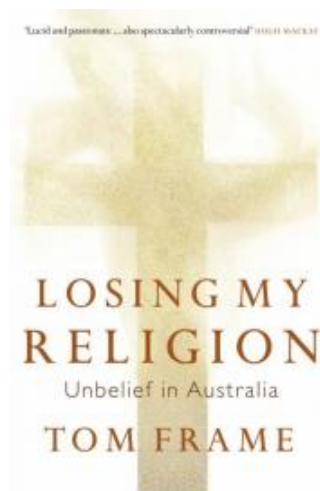


Review: Two books by Tom Frame #2 – Losing My Religion

Losing My Religion is the second Tom Frame book I have read recently. The title says it all – it's about "Unbelief in Australia."

Frame is a bishop in the Anglican Church and the head of a theological institution and this book is a passionate attempt to understand the context of his church and his gospel. With the long-term prevalence of anti or non-religious sentiment in Australian society, and it's growing impact, it is a worthy examination.



In this sense, this book is not an apology for the Christian faith as much as it is a consideration of that which the Christian faith must interact with or make a defense to. He sets out his agenda clearly; to give the background or context for unbelief in Australia, to examine the causes of unbelief and "the reasons for the loss of religious beliefs in Australia", and finally the "consequences of unbelief" (Page 7).

Perhaps wary of the critiques he will receive from positive atheists and other more militant nonbelievers (not that I've come across any review from an obviously anti-theistic point of view, pointers welcome in the comments) Frame spends a significant amount of time defining his terms – "faith", "belief", "disbelief", "unbelief", positive and negative atheism and anti-theism etc. This is a necessary precursor to examining statistics and other background material about the extent of unbelief in Australia. It is also extremely useful to cut across the grand sweeping statements that abound in this area about the death of religion (on the one hand) or the up and coming rise of the religious right (on the other

hand). Some myths are dispelled simply by knowing what you're talking about.

The section on the causes of unbelief is also very useful. His broad overviews are excellent introductions to history – the rise and fall of different philosophies and their impact, the various characters in the development of science and how they are taken today. It is good solid stuff and for the most part quite objective. It is only in the examination of the theological response to unbelief (characterised as “confusion and incoherence”) that you do sense some of the passion he has for the church to get this engagement right.

If this book is controversial (as Hugh Mackay's imprimatur on the cover says) I think that controversy rests in his section on the “consequences” of unbelief. He attacks the so-called New Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens et al.) – whom he calls anti-theists – not so much for their position, but for their attitude. He finds that this intolerance infects not just intellectual debates but the whole concept of secularism in a way that corrupts true plurality and makes it a form of tyranny.

“I want to conclude this discussion of tolerance by highlighting my concern that changing attitudes towards religious beliefs will have a bearing on attitudes towards all beliefs in Australia. When it becomes acceptable, even admirable, to mock and ridicule a person's religious convictions and customs – especially when the intention is to provoke an indignant reaction – the next step is to prohibit the expression of religious sentiments in all public places and forums. This has been the approach of the French Government in recent years and there are signs that Australia is poised to do likewise under the guise of promoting social cohesion and cultural harmony. Citizens are free to hold religious beliefs and to act on them, but only in their personal lives and only within their homes. Once religion is completely privatised, the next step usually involves

incursions on freedom of conscience and obstructions to the right of free association. We are some way from this kind of tyranny but it must be recognised that movements in this direction are usually incremental... I believe that contemporary anti-theism has some of the characteristics of fundamentalism and, like all fundamentalisms, needs to be opposed.” (Pages 267-268)

Frame therefore calls for a genuine secularism in Australia.

He also calls for a genuine church that can engage within this freedom, not presuming belief, not using coercion, but taking its place in the market place of ideas and so exhibiting a genuine spirituality with a substantial kerygma.

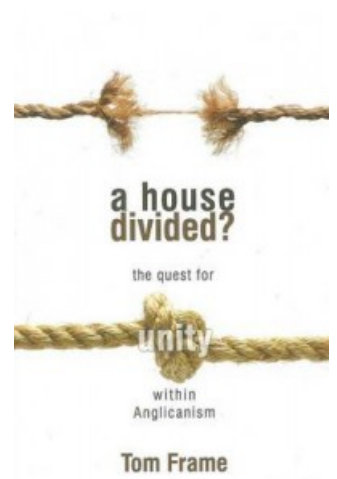
This is a unique book. It mixes polemic with vulnerability, precision with impassioned argument. It is prophetic for both church and world. For those who are persistent in their derision, it will be ignored. For others it will be provide food for thought and a basis for conversation. In that sense it lives out what it envisions – a genuine engagement.

My only concern is that it is a bit too “meta” – a book about books, an idea about ideas. It doesn’t so much argue the gospel of Christ but for the *space* for the gospel of Christ. That’s no bad thing though, and the question of how to fill that space, how to preach the gospel well in the light of unbelief, is a whole new task.

Review: Two books by Tom

Frame #1 – A House Divided?

I've just read the two most recent books by Australian Anglican author, Bp. Tom Frame of St. Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra. One book is an examination of unbelief in Australia, and conversely the other is an examination of a denomination in Australia. Frame brings analysis, rhetoric and a touch of polemic to both topics



I read the most recent first. *A House Divided?* is subtitled “the quest for unity within Anglicanism.” It is both an apology and a critique. Although the critique is sometimes more prevalent there is no questioning Frame’s motivation which is unashamedly reformational. At both the beginning and the end of the book:

“In the face of growing anti-Christian sentiment, the time has come for the Anglican Church to declare what it believes and to determine the limits of diversity; to divest itself of the institutional baggage that drains its members of so much energy and enthusiasm; and, to shed much of its antiquated Victorian accoutrement and stifling English mindset... In this set of essays I want to identify what is ailing the Anglican Church of Australia; to explain why parts of the Church have become diseased; to advise against persisting with policies and practices deleterious to its well-being; to prescribe changes to its common life in order that it might regain health; to suggest actions and attitudes what will promote vibrant mission and ministry, so that the Church will be able to face some of the challenges rising before it over the next 30 years.” (Page 3)

“While those who are obsessed with preserving structures and processes will disappear and those who are transfixed by the

need to dispense with difficult beliefs and unpopular doctrines will fade from view, the remaining Anglicans will constitute a remnant and their task will be to rebuild the Anglican edifice from the ruins of secularised faith and the rubble of compromised theology... The rebuilding will take decades but whatever arises from the ground will have better foundations, more solid walls and look more authentically Australian... I hope to live long enough to see this new Church and to rejoice in the grace of God that built it.” (Pages 289-290)

I confess that such motivation moves me and resonates with my own commitment to Anglicanism.

Frame's analysis takes him through a consideration of Evangelicalism, Anglo-Catholicism, and Liberalism in the Anglican Church. He gives the strengths and weaknesses of both yet he is not academically dispassionate about it. In fact Frame looks determined to deliberately inhabit the unhappy centre, understanding everyone, but not closely aligned with anyone. It's a lonely place to be. I can admire that. The only thing lacking from his analysis is to consider the Charismatic renewal in the Anglican Church – a renewal that transcends the other three categories in a way that he doesn't engage with substantially.

The axe is taken to the root of some Anglican holy cows – the characteristics of our episcopacy, the operation of our synods. I can respect his view that episcopal orders should inhere to diocesan oversight – and he uses himself as an example of someone who has such a discordant title. I would counter by arguing that he himself is actually an example of how episcopal leadership is greater than diocesan administration. (And gently point out that he is wearing an episocopal shirt on the back cover).

The global Anglican situation is not overlooked. My (mostly

online) observations from afar have lead me to a similar conclusion that I might call “redemptive cynicism” a sense of knowing that it’s finished, amicably handling what remains, and not being nervous about the unknown future. I have previously extended hope to the possibility of the Covenant bringing remedy, reduced that hope to the chance of bringing amicable divorce, and, since last year, reduced it even further. I can agree with Frame that “in all likelihood, it will not even go close to achieving its stated goals.” I agree with this position:

“I am naturally disappointed that the high level of organisational unity achieved within the Communion has subsided but I see no reason to be despondent. The time and energy devoted to preserving the fractured remains of the Communion over the past five years has not paid any dividends. An attempt was needed because something valuable was at stake. But this attempt failed because the dissenting parties felt they would gain more by going it alone than continuing in the company of those with whom they disagreed... Anglicans will hereafter be described by their ‘network’ affiliation or some other label disclosing the theological tradition to which they belong. This reflects the reality that the Church has a ‘natural’ community of its own, a community that is intrinsic to the kind of decisions it needs to make about its life and witness.” (Page 87, emphasis added).

The third part of the book breaks out of a stream of argument and delivers a series of stand-alone essays. While useful in and of themselves I think they are something of a distraction and actually weaken the thrust of the reformational polemic. A shorter harder-hitting book would be more powerful I think.

I have heard this book criticised for being ranty. I’m not sure if it is but part of me doesn’t care if it is. Reformation needs personal charisma as long as it is

constructive and spins a vision to aim for. There were times when I felt Frame was not tilting at the windmill that I would personally prefer him to. And some of the final chapter on "Moving Forward" (the main place where negative criticism turns into positive vision) seems a bit abstract and disconnected from a real plan or substantial agenda. But so what? It fired me up. It made me think about the world and the church and renewed the fire in my belly to see these old ecclesiastical bones bearing real flesh once more.