

We have had four spectacular days of common dreams, and as we prepare to return to lives of ministry and work, let's remember with the poet, Murray Bodo that:

The Journey and the Dream  
Are one balanced act of love  
And both are realized  
Outside the mind

--Murray Bodo, ofm

As our Common Dreams Conference is about to open onto the road where our dreams lead us, I invite us to call to mind the ministers, the teachers, the parishioners, the scholars and friends who formed us to this point, because we need to be those kinds of ministers and teachers who help form others.

We are especially indebted to the courage of Rex Hunt and Jonathon Rea and Greg Jenks, and for the persons and groups that supported and enabled them to imagine this conference when it was but a dream—they persisted, they made it happen—and if we think this enterprise has been without risk to them, we would be naïve in the extreme. But they have called us, and gathered us together, and your overwhelming response to their invitation quickens all of our hopes that this is a kairotic moment as Tillich would say—that this is an experience and a moment upon which, and within which, new beginnings and new confidence will emerge.

We have all been amazed at the response to this conference. And while I am tempted to say that in addition to remarkable and tireless leadership, and the cooperation among different organizations and groups across this country, that Jack Spong's presence and participation was the really key factor in such a turnout, I'd like to spin that differently. When we say, with Stephanie Dowrick that "deep speaks to deep," I think Jack's years of testimony and courage have been a catalyst calling forth both deep

reflection and real courage in so very many people. But I think it is not so much his voice as their voices that have found a home in our gathering this weekend—and so I see this event as a gathering of courage and imagination, and the emergence of a new belonging.

I sense that all of us who have been asked to participate as presenters have felt both called forth and blessed by the chance to be here in this place and at this time. I will surely remember this as a most remarkable journey in my life—coming home to the other side of the world. While I’ve not attended all the sessions, (I think Greg Jenks can confirm the range of my conversations over meals and drinks) I intend to draw on a range of perspectives that I have heard both from the presenters and the questions posed to them as I attempt to draw together at least some of the insights that have moved me quite deeply.

As I have been asked to reflect on the implications of progressive scholarship for our churches, I take as my starting point a basic and important tension that both presenters and attendants have surfaced for us in our time together. On the one hand, how do we develop a “strong and confident proclamation” as progressives, as Val Webb and others have urged us to do, while on the other providing “a bridge,” in order to assist others listening more attentively to traditional religious language to *move* in our direction. Some of you have posed that question to me following my workshop; I’ve heard it posed following other presentations—and, trying to be as honest as I can here—I sense in the question an appeal for a bridge not just between ourselves and others, but also a bridge within ourselves—connecting who we have been and who we are becoming.

I'm grateful for Ian Pearson's workshop on Friday that provided me with something of a structure to address this tension for a confident progressive voice on the one hand and a bridge to the tradition on the other. His advice to us was deceptively simple—it is important that we not simply be against something but for something—that we not simply reject fundamentalism, or homophobia, but that we speak confidently about what we are for. To be sure, it is vital that we critique intellectual positions no longer adequate and injustices against persons and groups of people that occur under the aegis of religious faith. A language of opposition or deconstruction is appropriate, but Pearson suggests that such a language is not adequate either for ourselves personally—insofar as we wonder whether we are becoming the mirror image of the fundamentalist—or for the progressive movement as such which needs not only points of departure and rejection but goals to which we are moving—what we have called here “common dreams.”

I believe it is possible to address both poles of this tension by approaching the interconnection between critique and affirmation, or between deconstruction and reconstruction. In the first part of the paper I try to name the basic logical structure of theologically progressive discourse—as well as my own commitments as a progressive theologian, and I'll do that in a way that calls attention to the linkage between critique on the one hand and vision on the other. In a second portion of the paper I'll suggest one possible way to think about this bridging question that a number of people have raised. Of course, I recommend David Felton's project, *Living the Questions* as a very important bridging resource, but I think I have heard in those questions I'm talking about, the possibility of a “bridge” to folks—not fundamentalists but still relatively more connected

to mainstream or traditional piety. Then, finally, I want to speak for a moment about our common journey from here.

OK, here we go:

### **Part One: How Theological Progressives Think**

I was having lunch at a scholarly gathering, a grant project funded by a large endowment, when I was joined by a senior scholar, a friendly acquaintance whom I had come to know on other occasions. He was, in fact, a significant figure in American theological education, overseeing the distribution of a large number of grants designed to support individual scholarship and the skills of theological teaching. After exchanging a few pleasantries, he proceeded to set me straight about my interest in historical-Jesus studies. “You don’t want to be known as the ‘theologian of the Jesus Seminar,’” he said. Startled by the comment, and the implied end of my career that I heard trailing behind it, I assured him I had no intention of applying for the title he suggested, and that, truth be told, most of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar didn’t care much for theologians anyway. Regaining my balance a bit I told him I found historical-Jesus research to be an important resource for any contemporary Christian theology that attempted to deal with reality. He scoffed. It was a short lunch.

I had forgotten about that interaction until I saw Bill Moyers talking with Salman Rushdie in the opening episode of Moyers’ 2006 PBS Series *Faith and Reason*. Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* was banned by the Indian government when it was published in 1988. It was also banned in Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and South Africa. In 1989 Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, or death sentence to be carried out by any Muslim—and not only against Rushdie but also his publishers—for

blaspheming Islam. For ten years Rushdie lived underground in England, moving from safe-house to safe-house until the ban was lifted in 1999. In this portion of the interview Rushdie protests the way Islamic societies—governed legally by the theological law of *sharia* in the Q’ran—have used theological claims to silence *public* discourse and to stifle the development of a genuine civil society.

Rushdie: Unfortunately the degree of censorship in the Muslim world is so rigorous at the moment that very few scholars are able to go back to first principles and re-examine the bases of the faith.

He then makes a remarkable suggestion:

Islam is unusual in that it is the only one of the great world religions which was born inside recorded history, and there’s an enormous amount of factual, historical record about the life of the Prophet and about social conditions in Arabia at that time. So, it’s possible to look at the origins of Islam in a scholarly way, based on historical fact.

In his response, Moyers softens the point.

Moyers: Do you expect Muslims to look at their faith in a historical context as opposed to supernaturally?

Rushdie: Yeah, of course; many people do. Actually, knowing a large number of Muslims around the world, many people do this. *It’s just that it’s the public discourse that’s forbidden.* (emphasis added)

Rushdie then highlights the importance of historical studies as a way of moving Islam toward a more tolerant and open civil society. Such scholarship, implicitly challenging the notion that the Q’ran is a divinely revealed text, would undercut the theological argument by which Islamic states and radical clerics censor and silence public dissent. Rushdie continues:

It’s very interesting about Mohammed, the Prophet, that he has a character; that we know what he was like as a person. It’s very interesting to see how Islam grew out of the social and economic conditions of his time. It’s very interesting to see exactly how he learned from, and in many ways borrowed, stories and ideas from Judeo-Christian culture. That’s to say, it’s, to me,

fascinating to see how this book came out of history. It's not an event outside history but inside history.

Moyers asks why Muslims aren't pursuing that kind of scholarship: "What do you mean? he asks Rushdie, Does someone have to say, "It's okay . . ." Rushdie replies with some exasperation.

Rushdie: *I mean you have to stop oppressing them.* Let's say at the moment there has been a very widespread campaign of oppression against Muslim writers and intellectuals. It's very hard to publish this kind of work; it's very hard for anyone to read it. Such scholarship has been banned outside and is banned inside the Muslim world. So, I think, if we're going to push toward the future you can't go on being hidebound by ideas which come from hundreds and hundreds of years ago. You have to enter the modern world.<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added)

As I took in Rushdie's comments, I recalled that luncheon conversation from several years back: "Well, I'll be," I thought to myself, "I think I'm a theologian of the Jesus Seminar after all."

I'm serious, and here's why: what I've taken away from my participation in the Jesus Seminar is not simply an appreciation for a communal scholarly enterprise, but a deep realization that theologies—at least monotheistic theologies, Christian, Jewish, Muslim—always inscribe a political vision of the world. Insofar as the Fellows of the Seminar set Jesus' speech-acts clearly within the religio-political context of Rome's political and economic dominance of the Mediterranean generally and Israel more specifically, they helped shape an interpretation of those sayings that articulated a more far more radical social-political vision of the "kingdom of God" than anything one encounters in the theologies of Christian Platonism—which are themselves very political.

It's not just that theologies inscribe a vision of the church—no, no no—precisely because the theological vision of what the church should be—is a microcosm of how the

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<sup>1</sup> *Faith and Reason*, PBS series with Bill Moyers, aired Friday, June 23, 2006

world *should* be re-created. As theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes, God language constructs power relations—not in some utterly distinct metaphysical realm but right here in River City. (That’s from *the Music Man*). Feminists really nailed this point, calling attention to the patriarchal structures of classical and much modern theology—in the words of Mary Daly—as long as God’s a male all males are gods. And then you find the same insight in black civil-rights theologies and liberation theologies, and then one realizes the whole imperial cast to classical Christian Platonism as well.

So theologies always shape a view of political order and power. Even Process Theology, which is influenced by more scientific-sounding metaphysics—is saturated with the logic of freedom. And when Whitehead or Webb speaks of how God acts in the world—they speak of “persuasion” rather than force—that’s a rhetorical or political image.

Now, I want to be clear about this. I’m not using the word “political” cynically here; rather, I’m simply trying to illuminate what often remains hidden—that religions shape communities, and that theologies construct distributions of power and presence within the religion—both for good and ill.

I should also add that it has been this insight that theologies are fundamentally political visions that has moved me to a more communal/political, or public, understanding of spirituality—one cannot, in my view pay attention to the work of the Jesus Seminar, as I have for some years now, and not notice that the parables call people to re-imagine the world (sounds like a good title), or miss the importance of forgiveness, or fail to notice that Jesus is crossing social boundaries, or ignore the encouragement to seek first the kingdom of God—these sayings and practices of Jesus all invite a deep and

unconventional engagement with the world—and the unconventional character of those sayings is quite pointedly designed to prompt reflection, contemplation and action. The Lord’s Prayer, I think, can be seen as an introduction to a meditation upon these different themes.

Now, let’s think of something here: you don’t get liberal theologies in history until you get at least the beginnings—and hence a vision—of liberal societies. That gets us back to Rusdie for a moment.

Salmon Rushdie is not a Muslim, but he knows a thing or two about being a religious progressive. He knows that the quest for the historical Mohammed would eventually call into question the legitimacy of a divine Q’ran and open up the possibility of a modern civil society. And he knows first hand the suffering that that work will involve.

How odd? I thought: While Christians might not flinch to hear Bill Moyers ask Salmon Rushdie whether there is “room in Islam for skeptical believers,” many would still be *very* uneasy if Bill Moyers had talked about skeptical Christians instead. Not many Christians want to recall the way that established churches—not simply Roman Catholicism—but Protestant establishments in England, in the Netherlands and Germany in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, used their theological claims of the Trinity, of a high Christology, the miracles of Jesus, and inspired character of Scripture to demonstrate that the true, established church possessed a Truth that transcended reason, and which thus authorized the church to be the censors of public discourse. We don’t want to know that. It is, as Al Gore might say, an “inconvenient truth.”

Rushdie’s contemporary insight into Islamic oppression reveals the deep vision and affirmation of both Deism and historical-Jesus criticism. The right to speak publicly—to engage freely in civil society without fear of punishment for one’s religious views—this was the imaginative, unheard-of common good to which Deists and historical-Jesus researchers aspired, and for which they suffered. The reality of repression clearly haunted Reimarus, who ultimately did not publish his lengthy manuscript on the *Apology or Defense of the Rational Worship of God*. David Hume didn’t publish his *Dialogues on Natural Religion* during his lifetime for fear of retribution, and wrote this to a friend about delaying the publication of essay “On Miracles”:

inclose[d] [along with his letter] some *Reasonings concerning Miracles*, which I once thought of publishing with the rest [of my book], but which I am afraid will give too much offence, even as the world is disposed at present. . . . I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavoring it shall give as little offence as possible. . . . This is a piece of cowardice, for which I blame myself, though I believe none of my friends will blame me.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Jefferson never published his *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, David Friedrich Strauss never taught in a German university after publishing *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1835 at the age of 27. Ernst Renan was fired from his university post in 1864 following the publication of his very popular *Life of Jesus*. Throughout these texts one finds an array of strategies that challenged the established churches’ claims to dogmatic authority over public life: Deism criticized the Trinity and called attention to the ethical teachings of Jesus—in order to balance the claims of public reason with ecclesiastical claims to revelation; historical Jesus discourse criticized the

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, “Hume’s Argument Against Miracles, and His Criticism of the Argument From Design, in the *Enquiry*,” in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by Norman Kemp Smith, The Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981), 45.

infallible and inspired character of Scripture, as well as any simplistic view of a high Christology of a God-Man. In these texts, the courage required for criticizing the legally established dogmatic traditions of the European nations, also required a vision of the kind of world that could emerge on the other side of that critique—the imagination, of what Rex Hunt would want us to call the re-construction, of the social order and its governance. And it was those authors who inspired the Australian figures Rex told us about on Friday. For these figures too, for Spence and Strong and Angus—their theological arguments aimed at an expansion of allowable public discourse and of who had rights to speak within it.

Now, we're not used to thinking of the emergence of civil society—or the separation of church and state—as a theological issue, but brothers and sisters, we should. And that's why it's important for us to rehearse those stories of Deism and historical-Jesus scholarship—because that's the basic template and the first-level achievement of progressive theology in thought and action: end the control of religious authorities over public discourse and open up the sphere of civil liberty, and of public life and debate. “You've got to stop oppressing them,” says Rushdie. And because of that official religious/political oppression in Islamic societies, progressive Muslims face an *extremely* difficult task that will require true heroism.

But let's bring the Christian side of this discussion up to date. Make no mistake, that in the U.S. which legally separates church and state, religion and politics are anything but separate. And progressives in Australia and the U.S., in particular, face well-funded movements of Christian evangelicals attempting to bully and cow their fellow citizens into the strict-father, moral straitjacket-language of being “Christian

countries.”—In the U.S. these groups have been even more aggressively at work since 911 trying to turn the threat of Islamic terrorism into yet another call for a Christian America—this time not only defend the old trope of “family values” but in order to defend President Bush’s war in Iraq and to unite the country against an “Islam” which preachers like **son of Billy Graham**, Franklin Graham, have already called an “evil religion.” And what they count on, time and time again, is that their recitation of classical Biblicist dogma—the divine authority of Scripture, the superiority of Christianity over every other religion, that Jesus was the Son of God with power over every creature, so evident in his miracles, etc.—will intimidate any serious challenge to the popular view. Predictably, **these fundamentalists use the demonization of Islam to silence Christian progressives from saying what should be obvious to every American—that our greatest moral achievement as a nation is precisely that we are NOT a Christian America, but that we have separated church and state and have sought to honor our religious diversity as a people.** But these same arguments are frequently used inside denominational bodies to silence or intimidate ministers and scholars from risking the creation of new communities or new theological models. That’s what that conversation, that I spoke of at the beginning of the paper, with that senior researcher was about.

In Rushdie’s comments, one sees a fundamental logic at work at the heart of a progressivist voice : 1) the ability to see beyond the dogmatic boundaries of one’s own religious tradition to a wider, public and common good. And 2) the courage that publicly risks crossing those boundaries—not only intellectually, but publicly and spiritually—in the interest of the world we are seeking to create. In his book, *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, put it this way: “To be a philosopher,” he said, “is to attempt to solve some

problems practically and not just theoretically.” One has to risk doing; our dreams must “spin on the real road.”

### **Part Two: Bridging tradition and progressive thought**

In this second portion—or interlude—I want to try to address the possibility of bridging between a somewhat more traditional (not fundamentalist) understanding of faith and progressive communities. But in doing that I’m going to draw on the political understanding of theology just discussed. There are several levels of discomfort in moving from a more traditional theology—where education and outside information can’t call the doctrinal system into question, where hierarchical relationships are the norm, the family-system of the faith community is closed, and obedience is an important and often dominant component of the spiritual life; *and moving toward* a more progressive theology—where new knowledge and education help establish criteria that at least limits how one speaks of God, and where the emphasis on equality encourages a much more fluid boundary of who is included in the life and vision of the community, and therefore worthy of respect, and where sensitivity and empathy more than obedience are the key indicators of a rich spiritual life. To move quickly from one to the other can be quite a shock—no doubt.

One possible mid-point between the two in at least Christian circles is an emphasis on humanity—the full humanity of Jesus, for example, as well as encouraging the full development of one’s humanity—sense of wholeness as the faith response to the call of divine Mystery. That’s something of a mid-point insofar as the doctrine of Chalcedon (451) said Jesus was fully God and fully human. While classical Platonic theologies started thinking about Christology from above (from his divinity), more

modern Christologies began thinking of Jesus from “below” (from his humanity). This way of thinking about Christ from below reached a real highpoint in the mid-to-late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In Roman Catholic thought, Karl Rahner emphasized the full humanity of Jesus and said that in the future all theology would be anthropology—that is to say, a reflection on the structures of human experience and existence. But also, the New Quest for the historical Jesus was underway in this period—and they emphasized the humanity of Jesus, and even in more psychological terms, the consciousness of Jesus.

Now I’ve thought about that in the last several days, because I was in high-school during that period of time. I actually spent the first two years of high-school at a Franciscan seminary, and one of my teachers was Murray Bodo, who had just written a little book called *Francis: The Journey and the Dream*. In what has become something of a popular spiritual classic—in print for over thirty years and now in over a dozen languages—Bodo retold the life of Francis by retelling the stories and legends about him. It is not a scholarly work but a popular and poetic one.

Whether he is writing about Francis’ disillusionment, his anxiety for happiness, his longing for intimacy, or the joy of his newly-found faith, Bodo steeps Francis in the language of the earth and in the pains of human discernment—even when listening to heavenly voices. Here are a few passages:

To listen to one’s own heart, when others are saying something different is the hardest test of a man’s (sic) spirit. And Francis thought he would not survive it. . . .

During these long, terrifying months, Francis used to go to a little cave in the hill opposite Mount Subasio and try to think out what was happening to him. . . .

It was in the cave that Francis met Jesus and saw himself for the first time. Up to that time the voices and dreams always seemed to come from

without, from a great distance. But during the agonizing hours in the cave, he began to hear a voice inside himself, a deeper, clearer voice that was like discovering a part of himself he did not know was there. (8-10)

What I experienced in reading *The Journey and the Dream* was a human Francis—not simply a saintly picture, or holy card—here was a psychologically complex Francis who searched for his vocation, who knew the anguish of doubt and fear—Bodo had explored and opened up Francis’ humanity; it was a Francis with whom I could identify, a Francis I could imagine and follow.

I offer my own story of my encounter with a human Francis in hopes that it may address this “bridging” question so frequently raised in our midst. Thinking about faith through that lens of Francis’, but then also my own humanity, enabled me over time to begin to see that Christian dogma started from a different set of assumptions; it allowed me to begin to question, and when I encountered works like Crossan’s *Cliffs of Fall* about the parables and discussions of the historical Jesus or even Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father*, I was eager to engage them.

Now I also suggest this approach for another reason. If you have purchased Jack Spong’s new book this weekend—and have reached the final constructive section in something like a Harry Potter hurry—you’ll notice that time and again Jack moves to Jesus’ humanity and to Jesus’ engagement of other’s humanity as location of where one encounters the divine. Now Jack’s book is *explicitly* critical of static formulations of Christian dogma in a way that Bodo is not—but they both made the move to Jesus’ humanity. Bodo doesn’t call the Christian dogma into question—he simply interprets it from below—Spong, the progressive uses the humanity as an explicit counterpoint to the dogma. But that’s why I think the move to humanity can serve a bridging function.

### **Part III: Where and How we go from here**

I have been reminded in several conversations this week of the philosopher Hannah Arendt's language of natality, of new birth. A mid-twentieth century philosopher, she rowed against the dominant eschatological impulse—Heidegger's "thrownness towards death," Kermode's classic called *Sense of an ending*, and all the Christian fascination with eschatology. She asked, instead, about the emergence of the new in public, in civil society—she asked about its risk, its unpredictability, its creativity. And I believe and hope that we are witnessing the emergence of a new thing this weekend—a new public voice of progressive theology.

In the wake of this event, I hope that in follow-up discussions, meetings between organizational leaders, fundraising efforts, and encouragement for wider participation, that you will help all of us sketch the political sense of this theology and movement—not only as a critique of a too narrow traditionalism but as a vision and an agenda. How is this progressive vision similar and different from liberation theologies, for example; how is different from classic liberalism or for that matter from neo-liberal visions? While maintaining a "big-tent" imagination can we also envision a set of intellectual, ethical and spiritual commitments? Over breakfast I lamented to Greg Jenks that I wish we had the benefit, in this time, of a progressive economic theory to help shape an understanding of social relations and realistic commitments to justice that would give real teeth to, and express real commitment to how a new progressive vision and spirituality can reshape our world. Our practices of consumption—especially in America—are systematically un-doing our capacity for sustained moral action and spiritual commitment. And I loved it when Greg said he really wished that Kevin Rudd could have freed up his schedule to

be with us—that nurtured in Bonhoeffer, Rudd does articulate economic commitments responsive to much of the devastation currently underway in globalized capitalism and ecological devastation. There are movements, Greg said, that are tending in that direction. (In the tradition of classical economic theory I hope you'll export those movements to us in the States—there's little supply of that courage where we come from and great demand.)

I would be re-miss, as a student of David Tracy—from the University of Chicago—if I didn't call attention to what he calls the two important voices or energies within the traditions of Christian theology: the political and the mystical. As I have tried to convey, I don't believe these two impulses are entirely separable—they overlap, intersect and ultimately reinforce one another.

And so I especially want to lift up Rex Hunt's call for re-imagining and re-constructing “the Sunday Morning experience,” as well as Stephanie Dowrick's challenge for us to be mindful of the practices which nurture our commitment, our imagination, and our courage to this new and public theological vision. What are those habits, rituals, and disciplines of attention that can nurture our questions and enable us to touch reality and rekindle our spirits for the journey? The political and the mystical are not opposed to one another, although I think many of us progressives are inclined to think of public action v. private spirituality. One of my teachers, Martin Marty admits to having written a public rebuke of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, when in the early-mid 1960s Merton published a sharp critique of the Vietnam War. “Who was this monk, who had withdrawn from the world, and what right did he have to comment on public policy?” I think Marty says it was about five years later that he wrote a public apology to

Merton—Merton, now said Marty, had been more insightful than those of us allegedly “engaged in the world” and he had had the courage to speak up.

This is going to be a long, long road and we need not only one another’s presence we also need to touch the heart of our vision to move us and to encourage us.

As we listened to the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir last night, I wept—or at least as close as I get to weeping—at their courage and presence and at the sheer joy of their song. How did they get here, I wondered—so much ostracism, so much imposed self-hatred to overcome—how can they sing in what remains so often a foreign land? In their songs I heard the metaphors of our days together—let your true colors shine through; hand in hand; this freedom train—aint no one can afford it; better get aboard it; I heard songs that sustained them on their journey and that can sustain us on ours, but most importantly I was touched by the sheer gift of their voices and songs—and surprised by my own listening near the end of a long day—in the gift of their music I felt the touch of “the real” as joy and as gift and as empowering grace.

As we try to forge a movement of different voices we need to be careful that we not speak *for* others—but open ourselves to be moved by and negotiate the voices of our common dreams. But we can be witnesses to the courage of people ostracized, marginalized and left behind. And our witnessing and respect for their song—can be important elements in framing the contours of a new political and progressive theology.

There is a time for us; there is a place for us; call it now, call it here, Sydney in 2007; let’s let our lives and our work bear witness to what we have seen and heard.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this event with you. It’s been grand.