

With friends like these ...

Reflections on the COMMON DREAMS event and its implications for theological scholarship in Australia and the South Pacific.

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Abstract

In August 2007 almost 1,500 people participated in a four day progressive religion event in Sydney. Academics from the theological faculties of colleges and universities around the country were mostly absent. This paper reports on that event and explores the problematic relationship between theological scholarship and the progressive religion movement before proposing an agenda for future engagement.

The first question to address is why I chose to offer a paper for our Faculty colloquium on this topic, rather than on some aspect of biblical studies? After all, there is no shortage of critical questions and new explanations in biblical scholarship.

However, it seemed to me that the COMMON DREAMS event and the related “Progressive Christianity” movement engages and challenges us all, no matter what our academic speciality may be. This topic, then, offers opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-disciplinary conversation.

This opportunity to “think out loud” about these matters in the company of colleagues and friends should also help me to clarify my own assessment of this phenomenon and its implications for my own faith and practice as a “scribe trained for the Kingdom” (Mt 13:52).

COMMON DREAMS 2007

As a first step, let me outline briefly what happened in Sydney last August.

At the initiative of a small group of progressive religious leaders, mostly Uniting Church people but with me as the solitary Anglican at many meetings of the planning team, an international conference of religious progressives was held at the Pitt Street Uniting Church in downtown Sydney between August 16 and 19.

Just under 1,500 people participated in this event, with over 5,100 “attendances” being recorded.

Religious progressives from around Australia gathered with others from Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, Iran, Palestine and the USA.

Christians from Anglican, Assembly of God, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Uniting Church traditions were joined by people from various other faiths and those of no religious faith.

The gathering extended over four days, and the large numbers attending surprised both the organisers and the media. Numbers would have been even higher but registrations were capped to fit the capacity of the Pitt St Uniting Church which served as a venue for the major sessions.

Two single-day workshops preceded the conference. The first was an interfaith event on the theme, *Reclaiming the public ground for tolerance and respect: Progressive perspectives on*

multi-faith issues in a time of fundamentalist resurgence. This was followed by a seminar for leaders of progressive faith communities: *Exploring ways to build and sustain faith communities that are intentionally progressive*.

The organisations involved in sponsoring this event were as follows:

- **CPRT**: the *Centre for Progressive Religious Thought*,¹ based at St James Uniting Church in Canberra but with an affiliated group in Sydney, was the catalyst for the event. Its director, Rev Rex Hunt, served as chair of the planning team.
- **PCnetSA**: the *Progressive Christianity Network of South Australia*,² one of the earliest progressive Christianity organisations in Australia, based at the Wayville Uniting Church in Adelaide.
- **PCNV**: the *Progressive Christian Network of Victoria*,³ is the newest of these groups and was formed in 2006 as a network of several existing Progressive Christian groups in Victoria. The Ewing Memorial Uniting Church in Melbourne has played a key role in the formation of this network that now includes Anglicans, Baptists and Catholics, in addition to UCA members.
- **PSN**: the *Progressive Spirituality Network*,⁴ based at West End Uniting Church in Brisbane and which describes itself as a network of people “committed to exploring emerging spiritualities, the boundaries of belief, ethics and spiritual experience, especially in the light of contemporary knowledge” as well as being “committed to supporting practices, programs, policies and behaviours in society that are compassionate, just, and ecologically sustainable.”
- **SoFiA**: *Sea of Faith in Australia*⁵ is a network of people who are interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of religion, faith and meaning. They seek to explore for themselves what they can believe and how to can find meaning in their lives.

Other groups involved in sponsoring this event included *FaithFutures Foundation*,⁶ the *Kirribilli Unitarian Fellowship*,⁷ *Pitt Street Uniting Church*,⁸ the *Progressive Evangelical Network*, and the *Sydney Gay & Lesbian Choir*.⁹ There was also a small grant from the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church to assist with start-up funds

The overall name for the event was “COMMON DREAMS”—a phrase chosen for its openness to people of different faiths as well as for its capacity to embrace both religious aspirations and our commitment to civil society. For this inaugural event the sub-theme was, “progressive religion as a transforming agent.”

The event was an interfaith program by design, although Progressive Christianity issues tended to dominate much of the agenda.

The initial design of the event was especially shaped by the ethnic violence at Cronulla in

1 www.progressivereligion.org.au

2 www.effectiveliving.org/pages/pcnet.htm

3 www.pcnvictoria.org.au

4 www.progressivespirituality.net

5 www.sof-in-australia.org

6 wiki.faithfutures.org (At this point I should disclose that I am the executive trustee for this foundation.)

7 www.sydneyunitarians.com

8 www.pittstuc.nsw.uca.org.au

9 www.sglc.org

December 2005.¹⁰ When the planning team held its first meeting in January 2006 there was a sense that we needed to claim a place for tolerant religion in the public discourse of the nation as well as between religions and within Christianity.

The weekend conference was preceded by two single-day seminars which addressed issues of religion in a multi-faith context (on the Thursday) and how to develop and nurture progressive faith communities (on the Friday). The conference itself included public lectures in the evening and worship with the Pitt Street congregation on Sunday morning.

The headline speakers were Bishop John Shelby Spong (on probably his final Australian tour) and local author and interfaith minister, Stephanie Dowrick.

They were supported by an impressive list of local and international speakers, including Bob Brown (the Australian Greens), John Falzon (St Vincent de Paul Society), Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black (Leo Beck Centre, Melbourne), Izzat Abdulhadi (Palestinian Ambassador), Jenny Te Paa (Anglican Peace and Justice Network and St John's Theological College, Auckland), B. Brandon Scott and Joe Bessler-Northcutt (both from Phillips Theological Seminary, Ohio), Rex Hunt (CPRT, Canberra), Fred Plumer (The Center for Progressive Christianity, USA), David Felton (Living the Questions), Sherri Weinberg (St Paul's Presbyterian Church, Davenport, NZ) and Val Webb (author and theologian from the Hunter Valley).

In addition there were breakout groups with the keynote speakers and workshops facilitated by a diverse array of people: Patricia Brennan, Cecilie & Mervyn Lander, Nigel Leaves, Michael Morwood, Negar Partow, Ian Pearson, Elenie Poulos, Noel Preston and Julie McCrossin. Dermot Dorgan from Brisbane served as balladeer throughout the four days and offered an ongoing theological reflection in music and song.

Despite the breadth of experience and the depth of talent in that catalogue of presenters, the absence of leading Faculty members from the theological schools in Australia and New Zealand was noted.

There were some exceptions, as already mentioned. The contributions by Brandon Scott and Joe Bessler-Northcutt were among the highlights of the event for most participants. Jenny Te Paa from New Zealand and Nigel Leaves Perth each brought their substantial academic contributions to the table. Noel Preston gave two highly regarded contributions, and I served as chair for proceedings over the four days. Norm Habel from the Earth Bible project in Adelaide made a presentation on the Seasons of Creation web site.

However, there could have been a much stronger contribution by colleagues as well as a greater presence among the participants. Their absence was noted and the missing contributions were lamented.

For this reason the COMMON DREAMS event also poses questions about the relationship between theological scholarship and the issues that mattered to the large number of people gathered there.

As I begin to think through those questions, I have developed a working hypothesis about that relationship.

Progressive Christianity—and religious progressives more generally—is a critical friend to theological scholarship.

I want to test with you today the proposal that religious progressives are the most enthusiastic “community of reception” for our work as theological scholars. They share many of our methodological assumptions and they consume much of our output.

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Cronulla_riots

In some ways, I think it is fair to describe Progressive Christianity and critical theological scholarship as sharing a common debt to the Enlightenment and modern Western culture. Certainly, I experience very little cognitive dissonance as I move among religious progressives and as I engage in theological scholarship.

However, there are points of mutual criticism—and even reciprocal dismissal.

Progressive Christians operate in a very different social space from theological scholars employed in religious institutions. They are at home in a world that is mostly post-Christian and where interfaith realities are accepted as the norm.

They are not accountable to the traditional custodians of the faith and they have no significant investment in the structures, or the futures, of organised religion. For them, orthodoxy is not a significant criterion and they are sceptical of claims to special authority based on tradition and creeds.

Religious progressives appreciate our work but they are also critical of us as timid, conservative and compromised.

I am sure we have our own set of criticisms of religious progressives. Indeed, I recall reading some of them in the religious press prior to the COMMON DREAMS conference in Sydney.

Progressive Christianity

The COMMON DREAMS gathering in Sydney was one manifestation of the “Progressive Christianity” phenomenon which has been taking shape while many commentators have been bemoaning (or celebrating) the demise of the mainline Christian denominations and the rise of the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. While much has been made of the loss of membership in the traditional churches, and especially from the Anglican Church and Uniting Church, the emergence of an alternative expression of Christianity that embraces the Sciences, celebrates difference, cares about the environment and welcomes insights from other faith traditions has gone largely unreported.

As early as 2000, Jim Adams the founding president of The Center for Progressive Christianity was telling anyone who would listen that progressive congregations in North America were resurgent. However, one of the most thorough recent studies is the research undertaken by Hal Taussig for his book, *A New Spiritual Home—Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*.¹¹

In that book Hal Taussig reports on over 1,000 progressive Christian faith communities. He describes emerging grassroots movement that has been taking shape and becoming more aware of itself since the early 1990s. This movement is only now beginning to develop national and international structures, and it remains essentially diverse and variegated.

Taussig distinguishes these emerging progressive communities from the traditional “Liberal” denominations. He defines Liberal Christianity as follows:

... for this book a “liberal” church is one that has not changed much in the past twenty years and has maintained a strong intellectual openness, an emphasis on social justice, a traditional worship with a lot of preaching and very little participation or expressiveness by the people, and not much attention to feminism, gay and lesbian

11 Hal Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home. Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*. (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2006). Other titles relevant to this question include Martyn Percy & Ian Markham (eds), *Why Liberal Churches are Growing*. (London: T & T Clark, 2006) and Jim Burklo, *Open Christianity. Home by Another Road*. (Los Alos: Rising Star, 2000).

issues, spiritual renewal and experimentation, or other religions.¹²

Taussig identifies five characteristics of progressives that mark them out from traditional liberal and conservative expressions of Christianity:

1. Spiritual Vitality
2. Intellectual Integrity
3. Transgressing Gender Boundaries
4. Vitality without Superiority
5. Justice and Ecology

We cannot consider them in detail here, but I will briefly note the key features that Taussig suggests under each characteristic:

SPIRITUAL VITALITY

- Participative Worship
- Expressive and Arts-Infused Worship and Programs
- Reclaiming ancient Christian rituals
- Claiming non-Christian rituals
- Small groups for spiritual development and nurture

INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY

- God language (including Christology)
- Science and religion
- Postmodern Consciousness

TRANSGRESSING GENDER BOUNDARIES

- Rejection of homophobia¹³
- Affirmation of equal rights without regard to gender or sexual orientation

VITALITY WITHOUT SUPERIORITY

- Celebrating Christianity without claiming superiority¹⁴
- Integrating non-Christian expressions into Christian practice

12 Taussig, *New Spiritual Home*, 3.

13 “the existence or the worthiness of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons before God and in church is a primary and thoroughgoing characteristic of this emerging movement.” (Taussig, *New Spiritual Home*, 35)

14 This characteristic appears to be the interfaith equivalent of the internal ecumenical acceptance that has developed over the past 50 or so years. It that time Christian denominations have found they can combine a confident affirmation of their own spiritual uniqueness with an openhearted affirmation of the spiritual integrity of other denominations.

JUSTICE AND ECOLOGY

- Convergence of old and new traditions¹⁵
- Ecotheology¹⁶

The emergence of the Progressive Christianity movement has reached such a critical mass, that it has begun to be studied from a number of angles. As mentioned, The Center for Progressive Christianity has been publishing data on the individuals and groups that identify themselves in relation to TCPC.

A separate study by Percy and Markham offers data from both the UK and the USA.¹⁷

Taussig's own research focused on 1,000 congregations.¹⁸ He notes that two of the largest expressions of Progressive Christianity are to be found within the Roman Catholic church, in what Taussig calls "progressive resistance movements"—namely the more than 38,000 Small Christian Communities around the USA and the Women's Religious Orders.¹⁹

We get a feel for the theological configuration of Progressive Christianity in the following representative statements from TCPC, CPRT and PSN. Some of them have carefully worded critiques of the institutional church or theological scholarship embedded in them, as we shall see. All of them also seem to express some hope to be agents of renewal and reformation within the churches.

The Center for Progressive Christianity offers this expression of what it means to be a Progressive Christian:

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who ...

1. Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.
2. Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.
3. Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples
4. Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to): believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and abilities, those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.
5. Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.
6. Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty -

15 In these progressive Christian communities there is a combination of the ancient virtue of charity towards those in need, prophetic critique of systemic and structural injustice, and ecofeminism.

16 Taussig mentions figures such as Matthew Fox and Rosemary Radford Ruether, but local expressions familiar to us include AngliGREENS, Earth Link, and the Progressive Spirituality Network. The "New Cosmology" is also impacting on the way that progressive theologians articulate their faith, as we see in the work by Michael Morwood and others on the Great New Story web site: www.greatnewstory.com

17 Percy and Markham, *Why Liberal Churches Are Growing*. (2006).

18 Taussig's list is available online at wiki.faithfutures.org/index.php/Progressive_Communities

19 One local expression of this phenomenon can be seen at St Mary's Catholic Community, South Brisbane.

more value in questioning than in absolutes.

7. Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers

8. Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought offers this statement:

The aim of the Centre is to be a forum that explores progressive religion and spirituality, in a way that provides a safe place for those who have found organised religion irrelevant, unresponsive, repressive or damaging.

The objectives of the Centre are to:

- Build a network of support for those who seek to discover and live by a progressive faith, sharing ideas and pursuing questions and answers.
- Create an open and welcoming community which respects the faith position of all participants, and encourages authentic interfaith engagement.
- Promote progressive religious thought as an agent of change and renewal in faith communities and society.
- Link with other groups and Centres of progressive religious thought.

We will live out the Aim and Objectives by:

- Offering support and encouragement to individuals and groups who are exploring progressive religious thinking
- Initiating workshops and discussion on the thought of progressive religious thinkers - such as Michael Morwood, Lloyd Geering, Marcus Borg, John Spong, John D Crossan, The Jesus Seminar, and others - by both local and overseas presenters
- Connecting with other world-wide groups such as Sea of Faith, The Alliance of Progressive Religion, Process & Faith, FaithFutures Foundation, and others
- Bringing together people of several faiths, so all can learn from and listen to, each other - thereby helping to develop trust, understanding and genuine friendship
- Encouraging creative thinkers to share their understanding of such theological trends as Liberation, Feminist, Process, Narrative and Australian contextual theologies, spirituality and praxis, and taking these thoughts out of the hands of the so-called 'experts' and making the benefits of such thinking available to any interested person
- Exploring newer and more appropriate ways to worship
- Offering pastoral conversation and support, as appropriate

A slightly different emphasis is found in the **Progressive Spirituality Network** here in Brisbane:

We are a growing network of people who are:

- Committed to understanding emerging spiritualities especially in the Australian context.
- Committed to exploring the boundaries of belief, ethics and spiritual experience,

especially in the light of contemporary knowledge.

- Committed to supporting practices, programs, policies and behaviours in society that are compassionate, just, and ecologically sustainable.

We understand ourselves to be part of a broader stream of humanity's spiritual evolution. Our growing network is, to date, a group of people who through conversation, question the capacity of current religious institutions to meet the spiritual aspirations of many in our society unless there is significant change.

Our original core group comes from the Christian tradition and remains committed to the heart of Christianity - the words and deeds of Jesus, and the experience of the church of the New Testament.

We believe that there are many pathways which lead to spiritual awareness and a life which is reflective of a God of Love – and we welcome to our company all who want to join us on the journey.

For the sake of completeness, I should also mention the Guiding Values of the **FaithFutures Foundation** which I helped to establish in 2001 and for which I serve as the Executive Trustee:

As people of diverse religions and spiritual traditions ...

- We affirm the value of religion as a traditional means to develop and sustain cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.
- We respect the uniqueness of each tradition, and differences of practice or belief.
- We acknowledge that religion has been used to inflict suffering and injustice upon others.
- We acknowledge that religion has been implicated in our failure to care for the Earth.
- We affirm the significance of human knowledge for the interpretation and practice of religion.
- We affirm that no religious questions are exempt from examination.
- We affirm the historical role of religion in the arts, letters and sciences.
- We regret the estrangement of religion and scholarship in recent western culture.
- We value scholars of all fields whose best efforts are dedicated to expanding human knowledge.
- We affirm the right of communities and individuals to access and appropriate the processes and results of historical and scientific inquiry.
- We acknowledge the importance of local collaborative effort in testing the significance of both traditional knowledge and new information for the future of religious communities.
- We undertake responsible cooperative action to bring the wisdom and values of our religious traditions into dialogue with the expanding body of human knowledge for the sake of re-envisioning the future of religion and its relevance to the economic, environmental, political and social challenges facing our Earth community.
- We are committed to sharing our insights and our experience with one another.
- We provide a global opportunity for participation, especially by those whose voices are not often heard in the churches and other religious institutions.

Each of these statements—three of them from Australia and two of them from Brisbane—were written independently of each other. They have their own distinctive features, yet they share many characteristics and all seem to fit easily within the Progressive Christianity taxonomy proposed by Hal Taussig.

The relationship of Progressive Christianity to Theological Scholarship

In this paper I have used the term “theological scholarship” as a general label for the activity of scholars engaged as Faculty in theological colleges, rather than a more cumbersome phrase such as “theological education and critical religion scholarship.” The term also has the advantage of describing well, I hope, what we are doing as Faculty in theological schools and it distinguishes us from colleagues working in a purely academic environment (such as the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland).

In this final section of the paper I want to explore the relationship between Progressive Christianity and theological scholarship. As already indicated, my thesis is that Progressive Christianity is a critical friend of theological scholarship. For this reason it seems to me the lack of engagement by Faculty in theological schools around the country represents a significant loss to both parties.

In the lead up to the COMMON DREAMS event in Sydney I had many opportunities to respond to questions about this movement and how it relates to traditional expressions of Christian identity. As I reflected on those issues, it struck me that one significant difference is that Progressive Christians tend to avoid *defining* the faith and to focus instead on how faith is *expressed*. I think this is a significant point of difference, and helpful to understand if we are looking for points of contact between our two enterprises.

We can see this emphasis especially item 5 in the Eight Point statement from TCPC:

Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is *the fullest expression of what we believe.*” (italics added)

The emphasis on expression over definition does not mean that intellectual precision is unimportant to religious progressives or that they are agnostic to theological questions. Rather, such questions are weighted differently for Christian identity and practice. Religious progressives have no significant investment in categorising other people as orthodox or heretical, and have a higher toleration for theological diversity than many traditional expressions of Christianity.

Traditional expressions of Christianity—both conservative and liberal—have tended to be dogmatic, with an emphasis on the beliefs that are true and required of all who claim the identity of Christian. By contrast, Progressive Christianity is less interested in what a person believes and far more interested in how their faith is expressed:

- in their personal and collective spirituality
- in their quest for truth (not doctrine)
- in their concern for the environment
- in their commitment to justice, and
- in their promotion in peace between diverse cultural communities, including different religious communities

One the leading authors for the Progressive Christian movement is Marcus Borg, from Oregon State University. He describes three domains that matter for people of faith: belief, behaviour

and community.²⁰ Within Progressive Christianity there seems to be a distinctive ordering of those three domains, with priority being given to community, then action and finally belief.

As noted, this does not mean that questions of belief are unimportant to religious progressives. However, such questions have less influence in the process of articulating and expressing faith than for other traditions within Christianity.

In the past it has been said that the Church of England was really the Conservative Party at prayer.²¹ If we extend that characterisation to traditional expressions of Christianity more generally, then we could perhaps conclude that Liberal Christianity at times seems like a Social Democrats convention and the religious progressives can appear to be a conventicle of The Australian Greens.²²

Beyond these tempting stereotypes, there are significant points of agreement and difference between religious progressives and theological scholars.

Progressive Christianity appreciates theological scholarship. There is no fear of intellectual inquiry and no privileging of religion from critical examination, but rather an eagerness to embrace new insights coming from any area of research and integrate that knowledge into their faith and practice.

If anything, religious progressives may be uncritical in their openness to new insights and could benefit from a more critical appraisal of the information they so readily adopt.²³

Religious progressives suspicious of institutional religion and those, like us, whose livelihoods and pension plans are funded by the mainstream churches. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves what generates that suspicion and see what common ground there might be for us to collaborate despite our very different social locations.

From the perspective of theological scholars, religious progressives can seem to be lacking in commitment to the important tasks of sustaining and reforming the church, and all-too-ready to dismiss considered theological critique of their latest progressive agenda items. That lack of investment in the structures—and politics—of the churches may reflect personal disenchantment, exclusion or even abuse. However, it is also likely to be grounded in the low ecclesiology of religious progressives. One of the contributions theological scholars could make to progressive Christianity is a greater sense of the collective and corporate dimensions of Christian identity and mission.

Despite the disillusionment with church and theological scholarship that can be seen in some of the statements reviewed earlier, a great many of these religious progressives continue to be engaged in their local congregations as well as in their denominational structures. This concern for renewal at the congregational level is a feature of the Progressive Evangelical Network, which seeks to reclaim the positive dimensions of “Evangelical” and also to support local congregations wishing to be progressive in their faith and mission.

20 Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001) and *The Heart of Christianity. Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003).

21 The quotation is attributed to Agnes Maude Royden (1876–1956), an English preacher and social worker. Agnes Royden studied at Oxford and was the first woman given permission to preach in the Church of England. An early feminist, she was active in social reforms including the campaign for women’s suffrage in the United Kingdom. See further at www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Royden-A.html

22 Interestingly, Senator Bob Brown, parliamentary leader of The Australian Greens, performed the official opening of the COMMON DREAMS program with a pre-recorded video address. He was unable to be present in person due a court appearance related to the campaign against a new pulp mill in northern Tasmania.

23 For instance, the widespread adoption of the arguments in Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (Walker & Co, 2005) struck me as naive and misdirected.

The parable of the Mustard Seed, perhaps the most secure of all the sayings attributed to Jesus,²⁴ seems relevant here. Like a noxious weed carelessly sown in a previously well-tended garden, the progressive revisioning of Christian faith and practice is spreading all over the place like a pumpkin vine in a chook pen. It may yet become a “mighty shrub” that provides a nesting places to spiritual birds from exotic places, or it may not. In any case it seems too late to eradicate the plant, so we had best learn how to cultivate it and make the most of its presence in the garden!

The key question for theological scholars now becomes how to facilitate a constructive dialogue with the religious progressives.

One of the points where a conversation might begin is the relative importance of defining our faith or expressing our faith. This strikes me as offering both partners the possibility of growth. As theological scholars we can assist our dialogue partners to apply greater precision to the way beliefs are formed and promulgated and their underlying assumptions. At the same time the religious progressives can act as a kind of focus group where traditional and contemporary formulations are “road tested” for their suitability to the current conditions of a secular post-industrial society.

An essential part of such a dialogue will be for the scholars to take on board the criticism that our concern for defining terms and achieving conceptual clarity has left us with little time or energy to express that carefully enunciated faith in personal and collective action. While critiquing their lack of attention to the task of defining the faith, we need to hear their critique at the absence of participatory and expressive dimensions in our theological scholarship.

I have a personal stake in all this as well as a professional interest.

The kind of church to which I want to belong is something more like St Mary’s at South Brisbane than St Mary’s at Kangaroo Point, let alone St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney.

My friends in the progressive religion organisations are the kind of people I would like to have around me during worship, when reflecting on how to shape my own life spiritual practices, and when engaging in social action.

It has long been my view that Liberals can have convictions, rather than simply denying traditional tenets of the faith that are no longer credible. In the post-Liberal phenomenon of Progressive Christianity we may be catching sight of one of the possible futures for the church, and it is a glimpse that offers me considerable hope.

I look forward to hearing your response to the emergence of an active progressive religion movement among and alongside the traditional expressions of Christianity so that I can better determine how to stock the shelves in the storehouse with treasures old and new (Mt 13:52).

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24 For example, see wiki.faithfutures.org/index.php/035_The_Mustard_Seed

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