

Stepping out with the Sacred: Progressive engaging the Divine

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If I begin by describing this moment as a “kairos” moment, those who know that word may groan, thinking you’ve heard it all before. This Greek term, contrasted with “chronos” meaning chronological or measurable time, has been used in New Testament theology to signify the event of Jesus as a special time, a period when many things came together to produce an optimal moment for a new beginning. However, there is more to the term than meets the eye. If we dig behind this metaphor, we discover its delightful Greek origins. Kairos (Caerus), meaning opportunity, was the youngest son of the God Zeus and was depicted as a beautiful youth with a lock of hair dangling over his face, while the back of his head had nothing but short hair stubble. If you grasped Kairos, opportunity, by his forelock as he ran swiftly by, you might hold him, but once he has passed, not even Zeus himself can pull him back. That brief moment in which all things are possible has been lost.ⁱ The term has been borrowed for Christian journals, organizations and newsletters to suggest a special, Divinely orchestrated time, but I want to retrieve the original *Greek* imagery of grabbing opportunity by its forelock here and now and recognizing *our* responsibility for earthly events, rather than something orchestrated in a far-off heaven.

Humans have often envisioned *their* moment in history as a “kairos” moment. Martin Luther would not have made his impact without the appearance of the printing press, general frustration with church skulduggery, and some influential people to protect him and fellow reformers. The ideas in Bishop John T. Robinson’s little book *Honest to God*ⁱⁱ were not original, but stood on the shoulders of theologians like Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and appealed to the spiritual restlessness of the Sixties. Feminist theology could not find its voice until women theologians reached a critical mass in theological halls, joining their disparate protests into one voice. Progressive theology, or what I prefer to call evolutionary or constructive theology, would not be where it is today without the likes of Bishop Spong and the Jesus Seminar speaking at a time when the institutional church is fading and issues such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, celibacy, embryonic stem cell research and clergy sexual abuse have forced it to show its true colors.

Why do Progressives need to grasp *this* particular moment of opportunity before it passes by? I believe we are in a good place in so many ways. Our post-modern world has given us permission to think in new ways about absolute truth, unchallengeable authority, hierarchical claims of knowledge and infallible doctrines, not only in the church but across all disciplines. Those in power have been shown to have feet of clay that can no longer be covered by the robes of office, whether judges, priests or academics. The current public exposure of paedophilia within the Catholic Church’s hierarchy at all levels, whether as abusers or protectors of abusers, makes a farce of claims to be God’s representatives on earth. As Father Peter Kennedy and St. Mary’s in Exile Catholic Church in Brisbane have effectively demonstrated, at great cost to themselves, the institutional church can and must be challenged when it becomes no more than an authoritative dinosaur.ⁱⁱⁱ Conservative church leaders who deny women’s participation and subject them to places of submission simply look silly in a

world where women have proven themselves capable of the highest office and the most intellectual pursuits in all spheres. Those who oppose evolution and scientific advances in loud, undocumented voices are being ghettoized as the world goes on without them. No longer is theology locked inside the halls of the ordained or chosen. A plethora of serious theological books claim prominent places on shelves in secular bookshops, offering the faithful new ways to think, and people like Richard Dawkins and the new atheists are promoting a user-friendly atheism that raises timely questions for religion. Theologian Sallie McFague calls theology, “that most pretentious, abstract and obscure enterprise,” simply the “attempt by human beings to speak of God from their own experience in light of Christian faith.”^{iv} Today, we can do our *own* theology, creating something that is functional and not obtuse, and that actually works in our individual lives. As always, I am using the term GOD simply as a three letter symbol without any specific gendered or theological baggage.

Perhaps the most stunning example today of grabbing Kairos’ forelock is our reinvention of the Sacred. As I outlined in my last book *Like Catching Water in a Net: human attempts to describe the Divine*,^v most serious scholars have abandoned the old man God in the skies judging who’s “naughty and nice” and intervening in the world to break natural laws to reward some and not others. In progressive thinking, this God has long been substituted for a Sacred *within* the universe, whether called Energy, Presence, Love, Spirit, Ground of Being, or simply Life -- images that allow us to talk with science in this kairos moment about the wondrous organism we share, the universe, and the mystery we *all* seek to unravel and experience, whether described in religious, natural or scientific terms. With this imagery, we have not simply rejected the biblical God and invented our own – there are plenty of places where biblical writers imagined the Sacred thus. Psalm 139 says, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I

make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” (verses 7-10). In John’s Gospel, we are told we will “know the Spirit of truth because that spirit abides with you and will be in you” (14: 17) and Paul describes the Divine to the philosophers of Athens as that in which “we live and move and have our being,” as their Greek poets had already said (Acts 17: 28). Dragging the Sacred back down to earth by Its forelock is actually a recovery of what was banished to the skies as Christianity evolved and Church and pope claimed the earthly role. This is not to say that the Sacred, however we describe It, is limited to one location or another, but rather that we have reclaimed a transcendent All-pervasiveness, where transcendence means being unlimited and unbound, rather than an elsewhere location. Immanence, the Sacred with us, is possible only *because* of Its transcendent limitlessness. This thinking frees us from centuries of Thomas à Kempis’ imagery in *The Imitation of Christ*, where the Christian longs to meet God in heaven after death, thus living in *this* life “as a stranger and pilgrim upon the earth, who hath nothing to do with the affairs of this world.”^{vi}

Re-imagining what some call God is not about taking a few nips and tucks in the old idea. It is a total paradigm change with endless repercussions across the board for established doctrines. Thomas Kuhn coined this term “paradigm change” in the 70’s to describe how new scientific theories replaced old ones,^{vii} but the metaphor has been copiously applied to everything from a toddler’s move from diaper to potty, to Copernicus’ move from an earth-centred to sun-centred universe. Paradigm changes are not about band-aiding old paradigms but about looking through a completely different window at the object in question. According to Kuhn’s analysis, new paradigms emerge from a particular culture, worldview and knowledge base when enough questions challenge existing belief systems. While such

changes can occur naturally through the evolution of ideas, crises often occur when the anomalies become too great and demand an urgent and radical return to basics. A new paradigm must prove itself better able to accommodate current knowledge but, while most people eventually convert to the new, some will continue on with the old beliefs in isolation, or join oppositional groups.

This has been the pattern in religious beliefs, as I described in my earlier book *In Defense of Doubt: an invitation to Adventure*.^{viii} Progressive thinking did not emerge in a vacuum – it is the product of contemporary culture, knowledge and circumstance where old dogmas have been so bombarded by doubts that we needed to re-examine our biblical and theological roots. Some people come to progressive thought as a natural maturing of ideas but, for many, a crisis occurs when the anomalies become too great and the ecclesiastical buffers against change become too threadbare. As with Kuhn’s analysis, such theological crises through the centuries have been dealt with in various ways – (1) new justifications for the old beliefs have either explained, debunked or simply silenced any doubts (2) such challenges have been filed in the too hard basket and old ideas, disguised with a thin veneer of contemporary jargon, continue, or (3) a new paradigm is offered, spawning a campaign for acceptance and a wall of resistance from the old guard, even if the new ideas better accommodate contemporary experience. Many people will reject the new ideas, continuing on in isolation, or in resistance groups that fiercely denounce the innovators, often without even engaging their theological ideas. I am sure many of us can tell stories of our own experiences in this process.

Our new paradigm for imagining the Sacred is not simply about using inclusive language and describing a non-theistic God. It is a whole new way of thinking that challenges almost

all established doctrines and disrupts centuries of systematic theology. Traditional Christian beliefs are not spelled out in the Bible, as many loudly proclaim, but are theological systems shaped around ancient philosophical arguments by stringing together disparate and often conflicting bible verses (and leaving awkward ones out) in order to formulate a seamless Divine plan of salvation. The creation story, Adam and Eve's disobedience, the origins of sin, the hero's death as a criminal, an afterlife, atonement theories, the Trinity metaphor, sexual ambivalence, an infallible Pope, justification by faith through grace, all became beads on this string. Cut the string at any point and the whole thing falls apart. Over the centuries, cuts *have* been made, but those in power have busily knotted the string together again. That day has passed and, not only do we have a handful of loose beads and a piece of tattered string, we also have discovered a host of forgotten beads hidden under the couch or behind the fireplace, waiting to add their story to the mix, whether women, gays, the earth, or other religions. Today, we are restringing the beads on a new piece of thread, giving more weight to previously neglected beads and diluting the prominence of old ones that demanded unswerving belief.

If we speak of the Sacred in everything, or as that in which we live and move and have our being, we are speaking of that in which *everything* and *everyone* -- Hindu, Christian, atheist, Sikh -- live and move and have their being, which brings us to a whole new imaginative place in terms of engaging the Sacred, the theme of my next book, available in October 2010 – *Stepping out with the Sacred; human attempts to engage the Divine.*^{ix} We progressives have been more than happy reimagining the Sacred as immanent Spirit, Life, Love, Presence, Energy, or even avoiding God-talk altogether. We have dismantled theories of atonement, divinity, miracles and saints in order to free the Sacred from humanly-created bonds. Yet we have been surprisingly silent on one of the biggest repercussions from our

new God-paradigm – the Sacred in religions other than our own. If the Divine is in everything in the Universe, or the Sacred is the Earth itself, we can no longer seek and explain the Sacred in language and concepts *only* from our cultural and religious imagination. If the Sacred infuses everything, we can no longer talk about Jesus as the only, or even the most authentic incarnation, especially if we have never investigated how other religions see the Sacred incarnated in *them*. We can no longer argue that God is present only in and for those who pray the right words and perform the correct rituals if the Sacred is everywhere. We cannot even *talk* about sacred and secular with this new imagery, as if they are different compartments of experience, nor can we speak of our spiritual lives as distinct from our secular lives if the spiritual infuses everything. Our paradigm change does not simply involve new ways to talk within *our* religious framework – it necessitates, for any authenticity or completeness, our engagement with other religious traditions as well, to see how *our* Divine appears in those different venues. Our paradigm change should challenge us, not just to interfaith dialogue where we listen to the other out of interest and hospitality, but to seek how the Sacred appears and is described *within* other religious explanations. The Hindu Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) said:

God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God ... Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted devotion ... The devotee who has seen God in one aspect only, knows [God] in that particular aspect alone. But he who has seen [God] in manifold aspects is alone in a position to say, “All these forms are of one God and God is multiform.” [God] is formless and with form, and many are forms which no one knows. ^x

The last phrase should grab our attention – many are the Divine forms which no one knows. Engaging the Sacred is an evolving journey across much and varied territory, not a single destination along a single path.

The Dalai Lama is always quick to discourage people who wish to convert to Buddhism because they like his ideas – and his personality as well! Religious traditions, he says, are as much about culture as about theology and people are more comfortable with religious forms that arise from familiar cultural experiences. What he is challenging here is actually the Christian idea of “conversion” – the claim that there is only one truth, a claim that deprived Aboriginal people of their indigenous spirituality and forced Muslims to convert or be killed in the Crusades. Max Muller, nineteenth century religion scholar, famously said that to know one religion is to know none which, when we think about it, is true, although most of us have acted with only one religion all our lives. How can we make claims of superiority about our religion when we have no intimate knowledge of another? The Dalai Lama is not discouraging people from seeking wisdom and inspiration in different traditions, but saying that we do not need to deny our current religious location in order to take up another space. Gandhi followed the teachings of Jesus more closely than most Christians, yet he saw no need to become Christian and forsake his rich Hindu heritage. Why have we made a passion of either/or with the human wisdom of the centuries?

This is not just a plea for interfaith dialogue, although that is very important. It is a plea that, as we progressives seek and reconstruct the Sacred, we do it from beyond just the perspective of Christianity, an interfaith search that will enrich our lives and open doors to a smorgasbord of wisdom. Once we abandon a God that created all humanity yet favors only

those who offer worship in a certain way or believe certain things laid down in a religious text only available to some, we cannot continue to assume that our new God-imagery can only be deciphered within our own limited culture and thought, and that our engagement with the Sacred is limited to a re-imagined *Christianity*. At a church meeting a few months ago, a minister who calls himself progressive admitted he knew little about what other religions taught. He was quite comfortable with this, because he was satisfied with what he experienced of God through the Christian tradition. While this may have been a common response in days gone by, it is no longer good enough if we are to describe the Sacred infilling the whole universe. If we are not interested in how other religious seekers experience the Divine we also claim to seek, we are simply perpetuating our exclusivity, say nothing of restricting our own possibilities for transformation. After reading my last book *Like Catching Water in a Net*, which traces how people describe the Divine across religions, a retired clergyperson said to me, “We certainly have spent our lives preaching a rather limited cult, haven’t we.” As long as the Trinity, with Jesus as the only way, truth and life, determined our theology, exclusivity was the name of the game, but now that we have moved beyond these claims, we must also move beyond the barriers that these claims built and held in place. This does not mean that we progressives will all come to the same conclusion about the Sacred. The whole point of the progressive movement is to be on the journey, or within the cosmic dance, not locked in new boxes of other peoples’ conclusions, like some new religion with a new set of “must-hold” beliefs.

This lack of interest in how the Sacred is engaged in other religious traditions was brought home to me forcibly last year at a theological educators’ conference. One presenter was drawing parallels between science and religion by talking about both natural creativity in the universe and also unpredictability beyond natural laws. In religious terms, this has been

called “Creativity with a capital C,” the Creator Spirit as the source of creativity, or the biblical Divine breath giving life. What struck me during the talk and questions afterwards was that, while there was much discussion as to how this imagery of Divine creativity affected traditional Christian doctrines about God and Jesus and our attitude to nature and ecology, there was absolutely no mention of how this impacted how we think about the majority of human beings in the world – those who follow other religious beliefs – who must also mediate this Sacred. We are much more willing to integrate our contemporary God-images with physics, cosmology, ecology and biology than with other people on the same search as us but down different roads – our exclusivity dies hard.

The irony, however, is that our new ideas about the Sacred have long been central to other religious traditions. In describing God as Energy, Creativity or Formlessness infilling the universe, we are newcomers on the block. Had we chatted with our friends from different religions before this, we would know such imagery is common. From the Sioux tradition, Black Elk said, “For the Great Spirit is everywhere; he hears whatever is in our minds and hearts, and it is not necessary to speak to him in a loud voice.”^{xi} Australian indigenous artist Wandjuk Marika says, “This land is not empty, the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. The earth is our mother.”^{xii} The Divine in the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* says, “As [humans] approach me, so I receive them. All paths ... lead to me.”^{xiii} The Indian greeting “namasti” with hands together and a slight bow means “the Divine in me greets the Divine in you.” Shinto teaching says, “There is not a single place in all the corners of the world where God is absent.”^{xiv} From the Qur’an, “To Allah belong the east and the west: whithersoever you turn, there is the presence of Allah. For Allah is all-pervading, all-knowing.”^{xv} Jain Sutra says, “My Lord! You are one although variously appearing.”^{xvi} Confucius said, “In the world there are many different roads but the

destination is the same. There are a hundred deliberations but the result is one.”^{xvii} For Sikhs, “God is formless, colorless, markless . . . casteless, classless, creedless, [God’s] form, hue, shape and garb cannot be described by anyone.”^{xviii} The Sikh Guru Nanak said, “Some call on the Lord, ‘Rama,’ some cry ‘Khuda,’ some bow before him as Gosain, some as Allah; . . . Whoever realizes the will of the Lord, he or she will find out the Lord’s secrets.”^{xix} To these, we can add the words of Peter in Acts, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]” (Acts 10: 34-5). What this *should* tell us is that we Progressives have more in common with religious traditions beyond our own than with Christian fundamentalists and conservatives who still operate within the traditional Christian paradigm, and yet most of us have not even bothered to search the wisdom in other religions for new imagery.

Since Christian claims of uniqueness (and the theology that supported them) emerged from, and were strengthened by, the *rejection* of other religions, now that these dogmas are dissolving, we find ourselves reconnecting and mending barriers that once held us firmly apart. Christian and Jewish scholars work closely today as the Jewishness of Jesus is recovered by Christian scholarship and Jews reflect on the wisdom of their own sage, free of Christian trappings and anti-Semitism. In a university class on Christian Traditions, I was explaining contemporary challenges to the divinity of Jesus, suggesting that Jesus evolved *into* God in the early centuries, or had divinity thrust upon him. A Muslim woman doing her Masters came to me afterwards and said, “If Jesus is not God, as Muhammad *also* claimed, in what way does the message of Christianity differ from that of Islam?” In intra-faith situations, many of us have witnessed such reconnections through the Ecumenical Movement and also in unions of denominations, where dogmas and ecclesiastical forms over which our

ancestors fought and died have shown to be cultural accretions and surmountable hurdles.

Religion scholar Huston Smith says:

It is possible to climb life's mountain from any side, but when the top is reached the pathways merge. As long as religions remain in the foothills of theology, ritual and church organization, they may be far apart.^{xx}

With our current return to the sacredness of the earth and our responsibility for its care rather than exploitation, we are borrowing language, concepts and earth rituals from indigenous traditions we once tried to destroy as pagan. Philosopher Sam Keen says:

To wonder is to perceive with reverence and love ... and in wondering we come close to the feeling that the earth is holy. Historically, the notion of wonder has been closely bound up with a religious mode of being in the world ... In my experience, the substance of wonder is more frequently found in the prose of the secular than in the often quaint poetry of religion ... Whether we continue to talk about God is not so important as whether we retain the sense of wonder which keeps us aware that ours is a holy place.^{xxi}

Sir Lloyd Geering, in his new book *Coming back to Earth: from gods, to God, to Gaia*, calls this conscious concern for the planet the “new mysticism,” whether we use traditional God language, the language of Gaia, or the everyday human language of ecology.^{xxii} In this concern for the earth as a result of our new paradigm of the Sacred, we are finding ourselves more in line with admirers of nature than with much of the worship liturgies in churches.

As for the mystical path, when Henri le Saux, a Franciscan monk from Brittany, went to India to “Christianize” India and its monastic institutions, he found instead that India's

monastic traditions had much more to offer *Christianity* about meditation and contemplation. Benedictine monk Bede Griffith went to India on a similar mission and ended up learning so much from Eastern meditation traditions that he combined the monastic traditions of East and West. In the 1950's and 1960's, the Vatican sent monks to Asia and Latin America to help Catholic churches in those areas develop their contemplative arm. Instead, the monks were converted to new meditative ways learned from indigenous traditions. When monks from across religions and countries gathered in Thailand in 1968 to share their common desire for union with the Ultimate, Trappist monk Thomas Merton, on the morning he was accidentally electrocuted, delivered a paper that said:

I believe that, by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have.^{xxiii}

And what about Christian ethics? Can we claim uniqueness here, as some try to do? As I was preparing today's presentation, I read the column called "Eternity Matters" in our local small-town newspaper. This particular one was written by the Presbyterian pastor and entitled "In Defence of the Faith." Noting that Richard Dawkins had been speaking around Australia, the pastor assured readers, among other things, that Dawkins' tirade against the terrible things done in the name of religion was simply not true, and then listed the holocausts by Hitler, Pol Pot and Idi Amin as linked to *atheistic* thought. "As *Christians*," he said, "We believe that all people are made in the image of God ... and this is why we should respect and esteem one another. It is from this value or idea that we derive laws which give equal rights to all people. Remove this *Christian* principle," he said, "and all sorts of philosophies

emerge which proclaim the supremacy of one group of humans over another.”^{xxiv} This common assumption that the Golden Rule, the ethics of how to treat each other, is of Christian origin again shows our isolation and ignorance -- Christianity was the late-comer here as well. Let me quote from ancient Sumatran wisdom, “Let all your undertakings be pleasing to you, as well as others. If that is not possible, at least do not harm anyone.”^{xxv} From Zoroastrianism, “*That* nature alone is good, which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.”^{xxvi} From a Hindu Vedic text, “This is the sum of duty. Do nothing unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”^{xxvii} From Confucius, “What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognizes as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others.”^{xxviii} From Plato, “May I do to others as I would that they should do to me.”^{xxix} From the Jewish Talmud, “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow human being: this is the whole Torah: while the rest is the commentary thereof . . .”^{xxx} From Buddhism, “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”^{xxxi} When we hear all these – and there are more -- the words ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 7: 12, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” seem strangely less unique. Matthew’s Jesus *acknowledged* this by adding, “for this sums up all the Law and the Prophets.” Given this religious universality, we can smile at an incident in Richard Dawkins’ recent interview in Australia with TV commentator Andrew Denton. Trying to keep Dawkins away from his usual litany of the evils of religion, Denton asked Dawkins what ethics and values he lives by, since he is opposed to any religious ideas. After some hesitation, Dawkins said, “Oh, the usual – do to others what you would like them to do to you.”

A current move for Progressives, when churches fail us by demanding we believe difficult things about God, is to focus on what we do rather than how we live, as in Gretta

Vosper's book *With or Without God: why the way we live is more important than what we believe.*^{xxxii} Florence Nightingale, a significant but unrecognized progressive, feminist and liberation theologian, said – “Unless you make a life which shall be the manifestation of your religion, it does not much signify what you believe.”^{xxxiii} Religion scholar Karen Armstrong says:

The experience of an indefinable transcendence, holiness and sacredness has been a fact of human life ... I don't think it matters what you believe in – and most of the great sages of religion would agree with me. If conventional beliefs make you compassionate, kind and respectful of the sacred rights of others, this is good religion. If your beliefs make you intolerant, unkind and belligerent, this is bad religion, no matter how orthodox it is.^{xxxiv}

Yet this is *exactly* what the Buddha, another progressive thinker, said some 2500 years ago. Born into Hinduism and seeing suffering as the human problem, he tried the religious solutions of his day and found them wanting. In desperation, he sat under a tree meditating until he found enlightenment or “became awake,” the meaning of the word Buddha. His solution was not metaphysical speculation but a practical way of living fully here and now, which is why his teachings appeal so much to the disenchanting of all religions. He dismissed blind following of external authorities, saying -- “Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in our books, nor because it is in accord with your belief, nor because it is the saying of your teacher,” he said. “Be ye lamps unto yourselves” and pursue your own path.^{xxxv} The Buddha dismissed prayers offered to helpless gods as fetters that bind and refused speculation about the Sacred, the cosmos or the soul, developing instead a way to live. It was not that he denied Something More but, since we cannot know, why waste time speculating. He advocated self- effort instead of passive offerings to gods and miracles. His practical way followed Four Noble

Truths -- One: Life is suffering. Two: The cause of suffering is desire, our selfishness and ego clinging to what does not last. Three: This selfish desire must be overcome. Four: it is by following the eightfold path with the help of a community – right knowledge, right aspiration, right speech, right behaviour, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right practice. In the end, compassion and action are the goals and the question of whether there *is* Something More remains open. This way of living does not ask that we choose one path over another, or one set of beliefs over another, but offers a tried and true path which others have perfected and which can benefit Progressives trying to live in fully human ways - the “do unto others” principle, rather than a list of beliefs.

Last December 2009, I attended the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne, Australia. Some 7,000 people from across religions and nations listened to how others engaged the Sacred and how this transformed their lives and shaped the way they lived. White Sikh turbans mingled with Buddhist saffron robes and Muslim women in hijab chatted with Hindu women in magnificent saris. Saami people from the Arctic, outfitted in striking embroidered wool garments, compared stories with sedately suited men with crosses around their necks. We became quite curious about one very tall hat in the line in front of us, wondering what his faith tradition might be, but when he turned around, he was the local catering chef. I introduced myself to Swami Parameshamanda in the crowd waiting for the opening ceremony – his Calcutta-based order has ashrams across the globe. “How heavy is a polar bear?” he asked after we chatted a while, and then gave his own answer, “Heavy enough to break the ice. Thank you for breaking the ice and speaking with me.” During the opening plenary, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Baha’i, Aboriginal and Shinto blessings were offered. I wondered at the plethora of wisdom represented by these people, not just in themselves but in their ancient traditions, all seeking

human transformation. His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shanker, having watched the massed orchestra perform with precision, in sync with choir and soloists, offered this as a metaphor for the Parliament. Each religion plays its own instrument and we don't argue or make claims as to which is the best instrument. The key to harmony and not chaos, he said, is to "play our own instrument, don't fight, and all focus on the one conductor – whom some call GOD." ^{xxxvi} Seven days of meeting sessions with some thirty options in any one time bracket would take a book to describe (the program book was three hundred pages), but in all the sessions I attended, I never once heard anyone making superior or exclusive claims for their religious beliefs – wait, except the Christian lobby outside the entrance with a sign proclaiming Jesus as the only way, truth and life; and the atheists standing beside them offering \$10,000 to anyone who could prove there is a God.

I could spend many hours re-emphasizing my point that, if we have a non-theistic paradigm of the Sacred within everything, or if we see the Sacred as simply life with a capital L, we must also address how this has been experienced in waters beyond our own. This is not just about acquiring knowledge of the other, but about exposure to human wisdom on a grand scale to show us how to live as human beings. We Progressives are busily reinventing ourselves in response to the failures within our own traditions, yet we are surrounded by people from other religious traditions that have long worked within this understanding of the Divine, who can share with us their wisdom and discoveries. Have we tried to read their sacred texts and commentaries, or even know what they are – the *Tao Te Ching* (Taoism), *TriPitaka*, *Lotus Sutra* and *Dhammapada* (Buddhism), *Avesta & Gathas* (Zoroastrianism), *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana* (Hinduism), *Adi Granth* (Sikhism), *Lun Yu* and *I-Ching* (Confucianism) to name a few? In Sikh doctrine, for example, the Divine Presence is without form but visible to enlightened believers as immanent in all creation. ^{xxxvii} The Hindu search

for the Divine leads to the discovery that our *real* self, atman, is actually part of the universal Self, the Divine Brahman. And for the Native American, “You ask me to plough the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom?”^{xxxviii} Traditions that have long built their theology and ecology on such imagery can surely help those of us trying to reconnect with the Sacred here and now, rather than longing for heaven. Norman Habel says in his new book *An inconvenient text: Is a green reading of the Bible possible?* “It is time we read [the Bible] as Earth beings in solidarity with Earth, not as God-like beings who happen to be sojourners on Earth.”^{xxxix}

While what we *do* and how we live lies at the heart of things, many of us are not in situations or churches where we can simply ignore the clash of belief systems as old and new paradigms continue to brush against each other and cause friction and dissent. There are times when I wonder whether progressive and conservative, for want of better labels, are not two inevitably and eternally different beasts, which is why I find an affinity with those who seek the Sacred outside my tradition and in theological images with which I can identify. When I began writing my forthcoming book about engaging the Sacred across religious traditions, I had no idea how rewarding it would be to me personally, breaking me out of theological boxes I thought I had already left and inviting me to meetings with the Sacred I have long sought, but in new and fresh places. I remember sitting on top of a hill in India with a Hindu colleague, asking him to talk about God while I listened. I could say “yes” to all his descriptions, albeit it in different names and metaphors, something I find hard to do with some of my “old paradigm” Christian friends with whom I share a hero and a sacred text but little else. When people hear me speak, some ask if I am still a Christian, which I find difficult to answer knowing what *they* mean by that label. Yet I also bemoan the fact that this part of my identity is under threat, simply because I have taken my religious tradition

seriously and refused to allow the teachings of Jesus to be misinterpreted and the Sacred locked in humanly-constructed limits of language and concepts.

Let me finish with another image from the Parliament of the World's Religions. Sri Jai Karunamayi, an Indian teacher, described the world as many rooms in one house – Australia is a room, India is a room, Canada is a room. What we need, she said, is unity in the house. This metaphor is more vivid if you have been in an Indian household where sons bring wives home to live in one room of the parents' house, sharing cooking and living areas. Although the metaphor founders if we think of the traditional “hierarchies” in an Indian family house, it reminds us that, since we don't have the possibility of moving to another “house” or planet, we must share the one we have and this means sharing the energy and life-forces which *sustain* our global home -- which some call God. We can hear other religious ideas and think, “that's nice,” “that's weird,” or “that's wrong,” but if we realize we are all seeking the Sacred, described differently through different human experiences, language and imagery, we don't have to stay in our rooms. We can use the shared kitchen to compare stories over a meal and relax in the shared living room, learning how another's story can resource our own search for transformation. The aim is not to convert but to share life experiences, just as we share recipes, political opinions and our planet. According to religion scholar Ursula King, we need more “world believers” who, like world citizens living in more than one country yet retaining a sense of “home,” have deep roots in one faith but relate to, and learn from, faiths *other* than their own -- spiritually multi-lingual and multi-focused people.^{x1} This, I believe, is the progressive challenge in this kairos time of opportunity. Here it from the lips of Buddhist activist monk Thich Nhat Hanh:

We have to be in touch with ourselves and with other enlightened people and we have to be in the present time because only the present is real, only in the present moment

can we be alive. We do not practice for the sake of the future, to be reborn in a paradise, but to be peace, to be compassion, to be joy right now. ^{xli}

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- ⁱ Aesop, *Fables* 536 (from *Phaedrus* 5. 8), c. 6th B.C.E, trans. Gibbs, <http://www.theoi.com/Daimon/Kairos.html>
- ⁱⁱ John T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962)
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Martin Flanagan, *Peter Kennedy: The man who threatened Rome* (Australia: One Day Hill Publishers, 2010)
- ^{iv} Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 15, 17
- ^v Val Webb, *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human attempts to describe the Divine* (New York & London: Continuum, 2007)
- ^{vi} Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 57
- ^{vii} Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970)
- ^{viii} Val Webb, *In Defense of Doubt: An invitation to adventure* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995)
- ^{ix} Val Webb, *Stepping out with the Sacred: Human attempts to engage the Divine* (New York & London: Continuum, 2010)
- ^x Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 1965), 86-7
- ^{xi} Quoted in Anand Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind: Celebration of unity in diversity* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2009), 13
- ^{xii} Quoted in Tony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian spirituality* (Melbourne, Australia: Collins Dove, 1990), 112
- ^{xiii} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 4
- ^{xiv} Omoto Kyo, Michi-no-shiori, quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 6
- ^{xv} Qur'an 2: 115
- ^{xvi} *Dvatrimshika*, quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 4
- ^{xvii} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 6
- ^{xviii} Guru Gobind Singh, quoted in Sikh Missionary Center, *Pearls of Sikhism: Peace, justice and equality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sheridan Books, Inc, 2008), 54
- ^{xix} *Adi Granth*, quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 7
- ^{xx} Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 1965), 6
- ^{xxi} Sam Keen, *Apology for Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969), 15, 211
- ^{xxii} Lloyd Geering, *Coming back to Earth: from gods, to God, to Gaia* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2009), 218
- ^{xxiii} Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin eds., (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1973, 1975), 343
- ^{xxiv} Pastor Simon Chen, "In Defence of Faith," *Mudgee Guardian*, Friday March 19, 2010, 13.
- ^{xxv} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 113
- ^{xxvi} *Dadistann-i-dink*, quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 19
- ^{xxvii} *Mahabharata*, quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 57
- ^{xxviii} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 99
- ^{xxix} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 117
- ^{xxx} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 35
- ^{xxxi} *Udana-Varga*, quoted in Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind*, 107
- ^{xxxii} Gretta Vosper, *With or Without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)
- ^{xxxiii} Florence Nightingale, *Suggestions for Thought*, quoted in Val Webb, *Florence Nightingale: The making of a radical theologian* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 169
- ^{xxxiv} Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: A memoir* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 4-5
- ^{xxxv} Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 105
- ^{xxxvi} His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shanker
- ^{xxxvii} John R. Hinnells, ed., *Dictionary of Religions* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 15
- ^{xxxviii} Webb, *Like Catching Water in a Net*, 95

^{xxxix} Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a green reading of the Bible possible?* (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum Press, 2009), 58

^{xl} Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our global quest for a spiritual life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008), 62

^{xli} Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, Arnold Kotler ed., (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), 86