

**Yoking Three Horses (or Forces) to Change the World:  
Agenda for the Science and Spirit Work Group of the  
Berkeley Conference on Spiritual Activism, July 20-23, 2005.**

The Conference on Spiritual Activism seeks to yoke powerful religious, spiritual and secular forces to deal with some of the major environmental, economic and social problems facing the world. The agenda of our Science and Spirituality Work Group differs from other conference activities by focusing on the 50 year time-scale rather than the more immediate issues that fill newspapers. Consider, for example, the topics of sustainable energy, population growth and terrorism. Our great-grandchildren may have a hard time forgiving us for the environmental devastation caused by our consumerist, free market values that burned oil resources to the exclusion of conservation and renewable energy. Terrorism may pose an equally great threat to our great-grandchildren unless virulent literalist strains of Abrahamic religions are contained. Growing factions in both Christianity and Islam believe that their God is the only true God and destroying the infidel (technology keeps making that easier) is the sure way to literal or political heaven.

Our Work Group's premise is that fundamental values of our societies need to be changed to ensure continuity of a high quality of life for all Earth's occupants, human and non-human. The Enlightenment wisdom was that progress in science and education would be sufficient for controlling dangerous religious traditions. There is little evidence that Enlightenment wisdom is sufficient, especially in recent years with the political right reinforcing dangerous tendencies of the religious right. The Conference on Spiritual Activism is grounded in the belief that progressive religion can become a powerful force in redirecting religious energies to healthier directions. The Science and Spirit Work Group will consider the deeper issues of what are the areas of conflict across different world views and how can these conflicts be lessened. We intend to develop new approaches for dialog amongst people of strongly held, but different religious and spiritual beliefs, and will examine specific proposals for bridging the gap between secular, holistic spirituality, and progressive and mainstream religions. The secular, spiritual and religious worlds need to listen closely to each others needs and worries. Einstein's famous remark that "Religion without science is blind, science without religion is lame" reminds us that much can be accomplished by yoking science with religion. The practical vision of science combined with the passionate vision of religion/spirituality can become a strong force for healing and tolerance and transformation.

It may be that the Conference on Spiritual Activism and the associated Work Groups are part of the slow process in evolving a new theology. In that regard it is worth considering Robert Mesle's words on page one of his book "Process Theology": "Why should we need a new theology? Because of evil; modern science; modern studies of scripture and revelation that confront us with their human, historical origins; increased contact with the other world religions; feminism; and our ability to destroy the world through pollution and nuclear weapons."

The following essay presents my personal views and beliefs for what is needed and how they have guided me in organizing our Work Group. The first half defines five broad

religious categories and points out some difficulties in having a deep dialog between the categories. The second half is organized according to the three topical days of the Work Group meetings. Each day will explore what can be done to overcome specific problems that prevent the various groups from working closely together.

*Day 1:* Yoking secular, holistic spirituality and progressive theism. The formidable Day 1 challenge is develop approaches for the seemingly irreconcilable bottom line of the three groups: scientist want reductionism, holistic spirituality and progressive theism want to see meaning, purpose, free will and connectedness at the fundamental level. There is also a problem of style where arrogance and closed mindedness of scientists is reminiscent of similar traits of fundamentalists. We will explore how the new physics of quantum theory and emergence theory can become bridges for bringing the three groups together.

*Day 2:* The Day 1 issues will be explored using the concrete example of the evolution/intelligent design debate. This debate is not only between progressives and fundamentalists. A large fraction of mainstream holistic spirituality/progressive religion are not content with Darwinism's rigidly reductionist, seemingly purposeless laws of random mutations and natural selection. However, one must remember that the purpose and meaning of ones beliefs need to be compatible with the experimental data. New approaches are needed for overcoming this conflict between the three horses we are trying to yoke as a powerful force for transforming the world.

*Day 3:* Explore the possible long range practical benefits to both science and religion/spirituality that can be achieved by our efforts. For example, in the past 50 years the secular world has siphoned off the liberal end of religions movement thereby weakening the progressive side of religion. If the major conflicts between the secularists and progressive theists are resolved the latter would be strengthened in its battles with the more conservative elements found within each denomination. We could also discuss how progressive movements can be built even in the presence of difficult-to-reconcile divisions.

*Day 4* will be devoted to finalizing an action-oriented summary of our discussions.

There is a great diversity of views on these topics that the Work Group will explore and attempt to bring into some coherence.

### **Five broad categories of religious practice**

I begin by defining five broad religious categories. The numbers in the following Table are my very rough estimates of each category's numerical strength in three populations.

	<u>secular</u>	<u>holistic spirituality</u>	<u>progressive religion</u>	<u>mainstream religion traditional</u>	<u>fundamentalist</u>
USA population	10%	10%	10%	50%	20%
this conference	20%	35%	20%	20%	5%
academia	50%	15%	15%	15%	5%

Countries other than the US have smaller mainstream and fundamentalist percentages. The precise percentages will vary depending on the precise question asked (try Googling: gallup+secular+fundamentalist+percent for more statistics). I intend to take a poll of participants who come to the Science & Spirit Work Group to check whether my guessed percentages in the Table are close to reality. An important aspect of the table is my guess that holistic spirituality forms the largest "denomination" of the folks attending the Conference on Spiritual Activism. We want to pay close attention to any contentious topics that can disrupt the bonding of that group or any of the groups comprising the progressive activist network.

The five categories of religious practice can be defined as follows:

**Secularism (non-theists).** Secularists are non-theists who tend to believe that the presently known laws of nature are a close approximation to the correct laws able to account for all events in nature. Secularists range from atheists to religious naturalists, with atheists having a strong antipathy to God language of any sort. They strongly deny being religious because they find words like "religion" and "God" carry too much negative baggage from the past. Religious naturalists, on the other hand are comfortable with "God" when used as metaphor/symbol/myth.

Spiritual people often think that secularists are selfish uncaring folks. In fact, originally scheduled for this conference was a Work Group titled:

**Up from Materialism: The Central Spiritual Struggles, the Clash of Civilizations and the Role of Secularism.**

It asked: *Can one fight the materialism and selfishness of the Old Bottom Line and still be secular? Can secular people make room for a spiritual consciousness?*

In the science/religion realm it's rare to have simple answers to important questions. For the questions of the Up from Materialism Work Group, I believe the answer is a simple, unambiguous, Yes. Those of us with parents or grandparents involved with the socialist labor movements of the first part of the last century are deeply aware that these secularists were passionately committed to healing and transforming the world in directions of greater justice. One can also be secular with deeply personal spiritual feelings about nature and our fellow inhabitants of Earth. Consider, for example, Michael Shermer's recent article: [Science is my Savior](#) that begins with the words "I am an atheist" and ends with his touching feelings about the starry night. Gunther Stent's obituary of Crick on our web site also makes a similar strong point about an atheist's spiritual belief.

**Holistic spirituality.** This diverse group of beliefs ranges from Buddhist practice to sophisticated postmodernism to "far out" New Age beliefs in astrology. The religious tolerance web site: [www.religioustolerance.org/newage.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/newage.htm) provides an excellent overview of the latter, pointing out that these "teachings became popular during the 1970's as a reaction against what some perceived as the failure of Christianity and the failure of Secular Humanism to provide spiritual and ethical guidance for the future."

The holistic group is important to our Work Group because many of their beliefs are present among political and spiritual progressives. They are passionately concerned about the well-being of our planet and are deeply concerned with nature. To help clarify this category, some of its leading spokespeople are: Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilber and Rupert Sheldrake. A common belief within this group is that quantum mechanics has turned upside-down materialist classical physics, allowing long range forces to operate. As will be seen later in this essay, I fully agree that the new physics has indeed opened up important new avenues for connecting the scientific and spiritual/theistic worldviews. However, it isn't well appreciated that quantum mechanics places extremely tight constraints on what phenomena are possible. In the view of mainstream scientists (including me) some holistic beliefs concerning mind and consciousness and evolution violate detailed calculations, as will be explored in first two days of the Work Group.

***Progressive theism*** is the third subgroup whose worldview is compatible with the laws of nature, but less obviously so. Followers of progressive religion use God language to describe what is sacred and meaningful in our universe. God language is used not only for impersonal aspects of nature but also for the most intimate personal issues of ethics and meaning. Progressive theists include a large fraction of theistic Jews, Unitarians and Quakers. Many ministers, pastors and priests believe the bible stories to be myth, symbol and metaphor, but those beliefs are often hidden from their mainstream congregations. In addition many members of Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and other mainstream congregations are progressive theists. I'm a progressive, theist Jew, a member of Rabbi Michael Lerner's Jewish Renewal congregation.

Progressive theists find the rituals and myths of our religions and the support of our congregations bring us to spaces where we can nurture the better parts of our nature. Progressive religion is distinguished from mainstream religion in that God is seen at myth, symbol and metaphor. That is, we see the details of the exodus story and the resurrection of Jesus as mythic, bearing deep truths rather than needing to be literally, historically true. Thus, there is no conflict between progressive religion and the laws of nature uncovered by science. For many, God is the force of healing and transformation. It is the force that inspired Moses and Martin Luther King to lead their people out of bondage and that inspired Jesus to become a revolutionary. Progressive religion tends to be sympathetic to progressive political and progressive economic views. Some traditions have anthropomorphized that God force to make it more accessible to human feelings.

Many thoughtful folks will be bothered (appropriately) by my claim to be both a non-theist religious naturalist and a progressive theist. This seemingly 'muddleheaded' ambiguity of naturalist and theist language is a central topic for the Science and Spirit Work Group. An excellent discussion of the connection between the naturalist and theist worldviews can be found in the last two chapters of Mesle's book "Process Theology". In Chapter 17, "Process Naturalism", Mesle presents an eloquent case that preceding 16 chapters can be fully placed within a naturalist framework whereby nature is all there is. Chapter 18, "Process Theism", is an equally eloquent chapter written by John Cobb (a member of our Science and Spirituality Work Group) saying that the naturalist framework is missing important

aspects of the full Process Theology. What is remarkable about both chapters is that they provide a path by which naturalism and theism can coexist on a rich platform.

Mainstream Religion-(this world). Followers of mainstream religion differ from the previous three categories in that they believe that not all events in our universe can be explained by the sorts of forces studied by scientists. They consider some bible stories as literally true rather than mythic even though these stories violate the presently know laws of nature.

My classification scheme distinguishes between religions that place emphasis on this world from those with an emphasis on the hereafter. Given the dominance of "this world" religions during the past century, I'll refer to this group as mainstream religion. Although progressive and mainstream religions differ in their metaphysical underpinnings (compatibility with science), in the realm of religious services and rituals it can be hard to distinguish the two.

Mainstream religion has diverse political and social beliefs. The political right has been extremely clever and well-organized in focusing on issues such as parental consent abortion, gay rights and the teaching of evolution that pull people in mainstream religion away from their progressive tendencies. A primary goal of our Spiritual Activism efforts is to develop strategies for counteracting this pull from the political right.

Most followers of mainstream religion seek a long term betterment of life here on earth; they support efforts for a more humane, sustainable world. Since a large fraction of the world are in the religious mainstream this group can provide many activists for the Spiritual Activism agenda. For example, progressive Catholic activists are (or were) strong in South America and elsewhere. However, the decoupling of mainstream religion from the worldview of science has led to conflicts on topics like stem cell research and to a reduced emphasis on environmental and ecological topics. An important goal of our Science and Spirituality Work Group is to come up with ways of improving the dialog between progressive and mainstream religion.

Hereafter theists. A growing segment of literalist believers see salvation not in this world but in the next. This sentiment can easily happen when one sees hopelessness in one's future. This hopelessness sadly is present in the United States as well as in hot-spots and neglected-spots throughout the world; it can be found wherever the disparity between the rich and poor is large and growing. Hopeless folks see no point in making incremental improvements to our life on earth and even see advantages in hastening the end of times. This extreme literalist religious belief is expected to grow in the next 50 years and can become dangerous as powerful weapons become cheaper, easier to transport and more destructive.

Efforts by progressives to reach out to "hereafter theists" are unlikely to succeed. It is more likely that when the disparity between haves and have-nots decreases, so too will the number of people who depend on the hereafter for the good life.

### **Goal of the Science and Spirit Work Group**

We seek to develop approaches to yoke secularists, holistic spiritualists, progressive theists and mainstream theists to build a Network of Spiritual Progressives to counter the Right's misuse of God. The long-range goal is for this Network is to foster values for ecological sanity, reduced consumerist selfishness, and greater community spirit both locally and globally. From the standpoint of the 50 year picture humanity will need to adapt our values and behaviors for compatibility with a sustainable world. The needed adaptations will not be easy since they may infringe on our cherished consumerist, free market values. Religion is well positioned to play an important role in leading the way for the needed shift in values. However, can the various segments of society cooperate on this agenda? Is it possible for secularists, holistic spiritualists, progressive theists and mainstream theists to learn to tolerate each other's beliefs so that they can work together with respect for each others views? Presumably the answer is yes, since there are numerous individual examples of deeply religious scientists for whom these worldviews and cultures are dear neighbors, able to be straddled. However, the larger mainstream secular world and the mainstream religious world are far apart. Our Science and Spirit Work Group asks what concrete steps can be taken to begin the process of healing and transformation to overcome the many years of suspicion and hostility among the various belief systems of the world.

{I got caught up with various organizational matters for the conference and unfortunately never got around to finishing this essay. The following are preliminary thoughts that are rough in places.}

### **Day 1) Challenges to yoking secularists, holistic spiritualists and progressive theists.**

Background. Can secularists, holistic spiritualists and progressive theists learn to appreciate each other's worldview? With three groups there are three possible pairings. The pairing of holistic spiritualists with progressive theists doesn't pose a big problem. I suspect about half the attendees of the Spiritual Activism conference are members of these two groups. It is often hard to distinguish between the two categories. Some religions are more spiritual than others. The main concern that I have is how the two groups relate to the scientific realm.

*Secular science vs. progressive theist.*

Most non-theists make minimal distinction between those theists who do not take the scriptures literally and those theists who do. Often the slightest sign of belief in external forces pushed the secularist into a mode of distrust. The flip side of this problem is that oftentimes progressive theists are irritated by the offensive arrogance with which outspoken non-theists defend their views. I suspect that we have all met non-theists who are as closed-minded as extreme fundamentalists. I'm sure I have offended people of faith by my confidence in knowing that the behavior of all living things can be explained in terms of the emergent properties of the constituent atoms. Secularists often do not listen closely to what progressive theists are saying about the mythic, metaphoric underpinning of their beliefs.

One might think that the various groups could come together on areas of common cause such as protecting the environment or caring for the downtrodden. But it doesn't work that way. As one small example, secularists are so distrustful of all types of theists that the notion of government support for religious organizations helping the poor and homeless is bound to meet with resistance.

One might think that the gulf between these two groups is easily overcome by learning to accept each other's language. After all, it is possible that both groups are merely using different words for describing the same phenomena. I suspect that under close scrutiny one discovers that there are problems on both sides that go beyond language.

Consider first problems on the progressive theist side. There are lapses among progressive theists where paranormal beliefs are supported. A good definition of paranormal phenomena for present purposes is phenomena that violate the presently known laws of nature. Non-theists tend to have antennae sensitively tuned to the slightest lapse of this sort. It's like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Have you ever tried yoking a raging bull? Whether progressive religion requires some amount of belief in paranormal phenomena is an important topic for our work group.

Now consider problems on the secular side. Most secularists, especially those with biology rather than modern physics backgrounds have a Newtonian mechanistic worldview. Folks with this worldview tend to be as intransigent in their beliefs as the most rigid fundamentalist. They are severely afflicted with HDD (humility deficit disorder). Physicists baffled by the mysteries of quantum mechanics seem to have a less aggressive strain of HDD. Their quest for a Theory of Everything shows some HDD, but religious folks are used to preachers with ultimate answers.

This might be an appropriate place to discuss the seeming enigma of my claiming to be both a secular non-theist and also a progressive Jewish theist. How can I be both a non-theist and a progressive theist. My answer is that I sometime feel God language is more appropriate for expressing the awe and transcendence I feel when witnessing Darwinian or cosmological evolution. Even as a Jew I can see Jesus as a wonderful guide in informing me of how I ought to be in caring for my fellow humans, my ecological surroundings and my own pains. Jesus and my rabbi support me in this revolutionary seemingly impossible quest for bringing harmony to the worlds religions.

In addition to finding inspiration from the biblical traditions I have faith that a solid metaphysical underpinning can be developed that is able to bring together worldviews that on the surface seem contradictory and incompatible. Hints of beginnings of that metaphysics can be found in the process thinking developed by Whitehead. That direction of thought has been taken to a full-fledged theology by Hartshorne, Cobb and others. Process Theology with its Whiteheadian, quantum mechanics ontology, may become a well-thought out metaphysics for progressive religion. It is my hope that the sophisticated Whiteheadian metaphysics of Process Theology can pave the way for a deeper understanding between non-theists and progressive theists. A large amount of scholarly work still remains in making Whitehead's metaphysics accessible to plain folk. Even though Whitehead was aware of early quantum mechanics, few mainstream physicists are able to understand the arcane language used by Whitehead scholars. A thorough reformulation and updating of process thinking and metaphysics may be needed to stabilize the needed bridge that can connect non-theists to progressive Process Theology.

The benefits of yoking non-theists with progressive theists can not be overstated. Progressive religion would benefit from the infusion of credibility and power (financial, knowledge and leg work). Progressive theists are presently attacked from the right and the left, and getting a truce with the secular side would bring relief and strength . Non-theists would benefit by having a much more effective means to deal with the conservative religious powers. Yoking these two forces can make a powerful combination. It is useful to remember Einstein's quote that began this essay: "Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame."

## **B) Evolution/ID**

Within the community of Christian believers there are areas of dispute and disagreement, including the proper way to interpret Holy Scripture. While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook. Many of the beloved stories found in the Bible – the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark – convey timeless truths about God, human beings, and the proper relationship between Creator and creation expressed in the only form capable of transmitting these truths from generation to generation. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as “one theory among others” is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully

employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God's loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris. We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

**C) Challenges to yoking progressive and mainstream religions. Issues between the multiple theisms.** There seem to be an unlimited number of insurmountable fundamental obstacles separating the diverse religions. Mainstream theists take scriptures literally, whereas progressives see them as mythic. Christianity sees Christ as literally divine whereas Jews reject that notion. The same for Islam with Mohammed. However, change may not be as difficult as some imagine. Recent Popes have expressed a desire to soften the conflicts. Catholicism pretty much accepts Darwinian evolution. As the world grows smaller there are pressures for accord. Many ministers, priests and rabbis already see resurrection stories as more mythic than literally real. The problem is that these ministers and priests fear that their congregations aren't ready to hear that view. But progress is visible. Many religions presently are very tolerant of other religions.

My own vision is that a quantum mechanics ontology, with its fundamental duality and multiple conflicting but equally true interpretations, provides a model for toleration among multiple conflicting religions. The notion of literalist reality has taken a beating from quantum mechanics. It turns out our underlying reality as seen by physicists has a mythic/metaphoric quality to it. This should be music to the ears of those seeking to connect mythic/metaphoric progressive theism with literalist mainstream theism. However, I'm well aware that this is a tough sell.