II.
Multiculturalism
in the Australian Context

The "Culture" within which Religion has been Found in Australia

Ian Gillman

At first sight there would seem to be little connection between a considered opinion of Karl Barth in 1938 and that of a columnist in Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* in 1988. The great Swiss theologian, reflecting on what had happened to post-Renaissance Christianity, came to the sobering conclusion that:

> Western humanity has come of age, or thinks it has. It can now dispense with its teacher - and as such official Christianity had in fact felt and behaved. Man finds himself as a 'universum', and although he cannot at once throw off his respect for the teacher, he feels that he can at last go his way with head erect. Grateful for what they have received, but determined upon a secular factuality, politics, science, society and art all dare to stand on their own feet. The floods have receded, and behold, there is nothing much left after the thousand years of the apparent domination of Christianity except a little monotheism, morality and mysticism. As a whole, the humanity of the West does not seem to find in the Church or to ascribe to it anything more. Because of that, it does not feel compelled to remain tied to the Church. That is the joyous discovery which it now makes. Nor does the heathendom which surrounds the tiny peninsula of Europe and its transmarine colonies, or the fierce Judaism which continues to exist in the midst of Christianity, seem to have heard any more than this, or heard it with any emphasis from the mouth of the Church. In spite of the most favourable conditions of the Middle Ages, the Christian Church obviously could not impress world consciousness as anything more than a religious society. Under these favourable conditions it tried to bind and to dominate. But the increased secularisation of culture makes it plain that it has not been able to do this. So now again, as at the first, it is forced on to the defensive. At first, of course, there is no hint of outward repression or persecution. There is no reason for this. Certainly, it is opposed until well on in the 19th century, so far as it is a matter of liberation from mediaeval claims. But the moment it decides on a certain reserve and

toleration, its freedom is conceded. There is no question of its being dangerous and of having to be radically persecuted, as had happened with full consciousness under the dying rule of antiquity. What is primarily in question in these centuries is the possibility that, assigned to its proper limits, the Church or Christianity may be an important and, under suitable oversight, a useful and usable force for education and order in the service of the new secular glory of Western man. And the non-Christian religions are on exactly the same level as inward Christian secularism, being content with a certain reserve and toleration on their own part and maintaining a mild indifference to the newer Christianity, so far as they come into contact with it. Of course, it might be dangerous for modern secularism and the non-Christian religions if the truth of Christianity, the grace of God in its radical and critical power, again found expression. It is significant that the only case in which there has been hostility to the Church in modern times, the persecution which early Protestantism had to suffer so long in many lands, was connected with the very fact that this truth had again found utterance. But that is long ago. When the mediaeval dream was over, even Protestantism had, and knew how, to adapt itself to the existence of a religious society which modern man regards as ultimately unnecessary and innocuous. (Barth 1956:335)

This would appear to be a conclusion quite readily applicable to the attitude towards Christianity and the Christian churches amongst most Australians of European descent from 1788 until the present. Almost the only change necessary to retain the alliteration but make it fit snugly (if not smugly) into the Australian scene would be to substitute the word 'mateship' for 'mysticism' at the end of the fifth sentence - and this while allowing for the fact that Australia has its own 'mystiques' associated with such things as 'the bush', sport and 'Anzac Day'.

A recent illustration of this applicability is to be found in the work of Laurie Kavanagh, a regular columnist of the *Courier-Mail*, who, on 23 July 1988, headed his piece, "Here beginneth a lesson for the church". Much of the article centred on what he saw as the pompous unreality in the churches, by which he seems to have meant the Anglican and Catholic Churches in particular, not least in their attitudes in the debate over the ordination of women to the priesthood. However, he provided some of his conclusions about what he saw as of the *esse* of religion. Included were the following:

> People are basically good, they just need to be educated to goodness, which should be the major goal of all religions. But they

can't be doing it right, otherwise a lot more people would be going to
church instead of jail or at least heading in that direction.

Generally, people are being overlooked by churches as the more
lofty princes wage war among themselves and on other
denominations.

They may not realise it but, at street level, religion isn't even in
the race with video, let alone television. John Lennon wasn't wrong
when he said all those years ago that the Beatles were more popular
than Christ; and religion has lost ground since then.

All churches today are kidding themselves if their aim is progress
against ungodly forces. If they came down to earth they would realise
survival, not progress, should be their goal.

Yet rather than accept offered help, the better to battle the amazing
degeneration of even 'civilized' societies, God's self-appointed
generals dither and posture, grandly pondering the unsuitability of
women in the priesthood. All the Neros fiddle pompously while
Rome burns because they can't smell the smoke in their sacred
cocoons ... I, and many others brought up like me, long ago traded the
churches' view of God and its associated mumbo-jumbo for a basic
philosophy that honesty and consideration for our fellows is about as
close as you can get to God on earth. Churches don't have a
monopoly on Him, you know.

In fact if basic honesty is not good enough to get you into heaven,
even if you've never heard of religion, then it can't be much of a fair
dinkum place at all. Besides, honest people wouldn't want to mix
with a bunch of religious snobs who spend their days pontificating on
who should have landing rights to their particular cloud ...

We don't expect you to banish evil overnight or empty our jails.
But you might try to get to young people before the opposition grabs
them. Get Mum and Dad to interest them in honesty rather than
materialism from the cradle and there's a big chance this world will be
a better place.

Sure! Sure! Hit 'em with all that mumbo-jumbo business, but
honesty is a big part of the world's problem."

Clearly, Kavanagh regards the essence of Christianity as 'honesty' and
'consideration for others', free of that 'mumbo-jumbo', which is regarded at best
as an optional extra of dubious worth, and one of the childish things to be put
aside as one reaches maturity. Yet it is Kavanagh who brings us up short to
realise that his attitude is, in all probability, shared by the vast majority of
Australians - and has been so, consistently, since 1788. The columnist speaks

for most Australians in his assessment, and provides a good contemporary example of the movement in religion from 'mysterium' to 'moralism'.

'Mysterium' was but little, if at all, to the fore in the consciousness of those who made up the personnel of the First Fleet. While this may have been expected of the convicts, their marine guards and the sailors, it was also the case among the officers. As the late Manning Clark put it:

> Except for Dawes and Hunter, who shared the convictions and aspirations of the reverend chaplain, these officers were characterised by their faith in common sense, men who disclaimed enthusiasm either for the religion of the Established Church, or the faith of the Enlightenment, or the belief in the noble savage. They accepted the Protestant religion ... for its contribution to higher civilization and liberty, for its services in emancipating mankind from priestcraft and superstition, while remaining discreetly silent about their attitude to the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England. (Clark 1963:76)

Of course, the very nature of the colony imposed its own demand in favour of 'moralism' rather than of 'mysterium'.

Governor Phillip's instructions had linked together his responsibility to "enforce a due observance of religion **and** good order among the inhabitants of the new settlement" (Woolmington 1976:1).

It was obvious to the sole chaplain, Richard Johnson, even before the First Fleet left England, that he was expected to contribute to the preservation of 'good order' by the 'due observance of religion', as much as did guards and overseers. Having heard the chaplain preach at Portsmouth, "the character of his sermons led Governor Phillip to request him 'to begin with moral subjects'" (Cable 1967:17).

While in no way averse to emphasising 'moral subjects' it is unlikely that, as a product of the Whitefield-led evangelical awakening within Anglicanism, Johnson would have begun with such. Rather, as he expressed it in a 74 page tract he wrote in 1792, he felt himself charged to proclaim a gospel which:

> proposes a free and gracious pardon to the guilty, cleansing to the polluted, healing to the sick, happiness to the miserable, light for those who sit in darkness, strength for the weak, food for the hungry, and even life for the dead. (See Macintosh 1978:53.)[1]

In addition it is significant that the tract began with an outline "of evangelical preaching of the day, ending with moral exhortation based on the

Ten Commandments" (*op. cit.*:60); that is, it reversed the sequence requested by the Governor in 1787.

A number of factors, however, conspired to lead to the perception that the chaplains were little more than 'moral policemen' and enforcers of moralism. A major concern of the Enlightenment, which informed some of those in the Establishment, was to focus on a universal ethic which would be applicable in any place on earth. Religion was regarded as the handmaiden of such a morality, the details of which were drawn as much, if not more, from Neo-Stoicism as from Christianity. Moral improvement was seen as a prime necessity and religion could and should be used in this cause, a cause which saw in such morality the very essence of what was acceptable in religion, for example, 'Constant attendance on Divine Worship' was seen as a key feature in the moral education of the young, by not a few who wrote to the colonial newspapers of the day. (Woolmington 1976:144-145)

Then there was the paucity of what could be regarded as sincere response to such evangelical preaching as did occur.[2] It is highly probable that many of the convicts had their first taste of organized religion, the Bible and the clergy, while serving their sentences (Grocott 1980, *passim*) - a context, in itself, likely to promote resentment among most, assuming that the message heard was in anyway grasped as relevant. Disappointment at the response on one hand, and official and community expectations on the other, combined to cause the chaplains to give more emphasis to moralism - not that there was not need of improvement in this area among both the convicts and the authorities. At least, response to such preaching in terms of improved behaviour was measurable.

So the chaplains came to stress moralism, and to strengthen the expectation to be found in a letter to the *Sydney Gazette* in 1808 that morality is the first step towards involvement in human redemption (Woolmington 1976:144) rather than a consequence of it. The chaplains may well have been encouraged in this also by the fact that they too, as property owners, had an interest in such moral improvement. Johnson complained that he did not come out to New South Wales "as an overseer or a farmer" (*op. cit.*:7), but he was caught up in both roles. Marsden, without doubt, revelled in them for the status and security they brought to one who came from indigent and socially despised beginnings. To the extent that they were property owners, the chaplains had concerns in common with that class which in the 18th century had strengthened the penalties against any who by theft or forgery subverted the sanctity of private property.[3]

Seconded to the magistrates' bench, because they were, to a degree matched by few others in the Establishment, free of the taints of 'ill fame' and 'scandal', the chaplains not only were expected to promote moralism in their preaching but also had to punish proved lapses. This may be dubbed 'the goad factor'. They had in their hands the power to exact immediate retribution on offenders, and Marsden in particular accrued a reputation for severity that ill-accorded with his expressed concern for spreading awareness of "a God of grace and mercy" (Clark 1963:76). What has become increasingly apparent was that the level of morality looked for (if not lived out) by church and non-church folk alike became identified with what was regarded as the essence of Christianity. The gospel of "a free and gracious pardon to the guilty" was moved by most of the population from centre stage to the wings. There it has remained, where it is seen as crucial by only a relatively small minority of the population.

Related to the emphasis on moralism was the expectation that prosperity would surely attend those who lived by God's law. This expectation, which may be called "the carrot factor", (see, for example, Horne 1976), when combined with the Protestant work ethic, had a wide influence, not least because it set even quite moderate wealth in the context of divine approbation. Not only free settlers and members of the New South Wales Corps, but time-expired or conditionally released convicts had not unreasonable hopes of achieving at least modest wealth. The examples of John McArthur, Simeon Lord, Mary Reibey and Samuel Terry (see, for example, Dow 1974) were there for all to see, while those of Samuel Marsden and John Joseph Therry showed how piety and prosperity were at peace with each other. (In 1836 Marsden owned 29 farms with a total area of 11,724 acres, and left an estate in 1838 valued at $30,000, which made him a millionaire by our standards (Yarwood 1977:278-279), while Therry had a number of properties, including the present Sydney suburb of Lidcombe and 1,500 acres at Pittwater (Eddy 1967:512).)

The foundations thus laid were built upon extensively in later generations and religious observance focussed less on the essential 'mysterium' and increasingly on 'moralism'. As Ian Turner described self-reliant Australians:

> From the moment of their first landing, these new Australians were involved with moulding an untouched and often intransigent environment to their will. A religion which was appropriate for the ordered society and regular living of rural England seemed irrelevant to pioneering labour in the Australian bush. Men carved their own lives out of remote and monstrously difficult wilderness; what they

achieved they owed to themselves, and they found little for which to
thank their fathers' heaven. And, as they conquered the bush and
moved into the cities they were building, they created an urban
environment which was even less responsive to religion as anything
other than ceremonial for formal occasions. (Turner 1968:x-xi)

Such a spirit of self-reliance, largely untouched by the revival tradition of
the American frontier, relegated the 'mysterium' of religion to the realm of
emergencies, rites of passage and occasional ceremonial. It was not at the centre
of the lives of most of the population, but on the periphery, to be displayed on
special occasions only. Such spasmodic display allowed those concerned to
stand fairly loose to such central doctrinal affirmations as they may have heard,
and to concentrate on the general humanitarian ethics which they had come to
identify with Christianity. Such an identification was to be found both among
those outside the churches and the 1 in 3 to 1 in 4 of the population who were
reasonably frequent participants in public worship. It was not considered by
most to be necessary to root such ethical demands in consistent religious
commitment, least of all in commitment to institutionalised religions in public
profession and overt practice.

The few intellectuals involved may well have understood this in terms of
the philosophies associated with James and John Stuart Mill and Jeremy
Bentham. As for the majority of the population, John Ritchie may be right in
believing that many among the literate drew their ideas from the emphases of
Charles Dickens rather than from those of the pulpit. While the novelist opposed
the Benthamites as being "all head and no heart" and as without "any sense of
reverence for the deeper mysteries", Dickens also:

denounced the Evangelical Revival and its participants who tried to
dominate mankind through religion, particularly through instilling fear
of God the Terrible Avenger. (Ritchie 1978:23-25)

Fond of alcohol himself, he attacked those who opposed it in the cause of
temperance and prohibition, advocated by not a few in the churches.

While Dickens brought comfort to the migrants in Australia by
making the middling-sort his heroes, and by reducing the stature of
their dominators, he also reinforced their predilections for drink and
fellowship and fresh air, their attitude toward Christmas and to the
teaching of the man Jesus. In his novels he showed what he thought
they should learn from the Galilean fisherman: the lessons of the
Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Magdalen, and the Sermon on

the Mount ... Egalitarian and anti-authoritarian to some extent, the common people in Australia thought they knew what mattered: a full stomach, a roof over their heads, their drink, their mates, the country-side, and a good time for all - particularly at Christmas. Bentham's greatest good for the greatest number had become humanized and less doctrinaire. It all amounted to a kind of secular humanism, though the masses would never contemplate such a high-flying term. Their outlook was partly the product of environment and chance, but it also represented the transplantation and adaptation of the ideas of Charles Dickens. (Ritchie 1978:23-25)

For most this was indistinguishable from what they 'understood' to be the central thrust of Christianity. The majority of the population had developed ethical anti-bodies which countered such efforts as the churches made to communicate the fullness of the gospel, via confrontation with the 'mysterium'.

It must be admitted that the churches, with their campaigns against the 'desecration' of the Sabbath, the consumption of alcohol, gambling, sexual immorality and pornography, fuelled an attitude which allowed many to retain a nominal denominational identity without commitment of self, time or money to the denominational institutions. Those values which attracted the majority of the population could be expressed more acceptably and less demandingly through the various avenues of adult education and moral improvement, like the Schools of Arts and Mechanics Institutes which had a great vogue in the mid 19th century (see Serle 1973:32-25). They could be expressed also through the emerging trade unions, if corporate and institutional expression of any sort was thought to be desirable.

Indeed it is instructive to see how some of the key early trade union leaders continued the moralistic demythologising of the 'mysterium', and provide a clear link with what we see in Laurie Kavanagh in 1988. So we have William Guthrie Spence spelling out the ideals of unionism in 1892 thus:

I take it that the human family is inherently good. I go against the old idea of always crediting our human frailties to original sin. (*Cheers.*) I say that humanity is inherently good if we only let it have a chance to exercise its goodness ...

If asked to give a short definition of our aim I should say it is an effort to give practical effect to the teachings of the founder of Christianity, by making it possible, easy, and natural for men to act justly, truthfully, and honestly. To effect this by social and political reform we believe to be possible ...

Christ taught men that they could and should bring the kingdom of heaven upon earth. New unionism aims at giving practical effect to

that, knowing full well that the inherent good in humanity, if it has opportunity to expand, will rise, will become practical and bind the people together. (Turner 1968:172, 174-175)

The same approach was espoused and promulgated by Henry Lawson, as Marian Zaunbrecher (1980) has established.

Lawson conceived the founder of Christianity to be the champion of the underdog; of the prostitute, the gambler, the drunkard, the prisoner and the poor ... and ...

Lawson gave the impression that he had an immense liking and respect for the one he called 'the Nazarene'. To Lawson he was not God incarnate, but the ideal man ...

Though Lawson had no desire to be affiliated with the organized church, he did not consider himself to be an irreligious man. This apparent inconsistency was based on a distinction between 'true religion' and the religion of the church. The religion brought to Australia by its migrants had little relevance to the Australian environment.

> The 'bushman' was 'free', 'unshackled by customs and constraints of civilized communities'; he was 'a man's man' and 'one of nature's gentlemen', a nationalist, one whose inherited faith was often replaced by the vague sentiment of 'mateship'.

'True religion' was therefore primarily ethical in character. It is not to be confused with ethics, however, for religion is practical, concerned with man's conduct. To borrow the words of another *Bulletin* writer, Joseph Furphy:

> Religion, divested of frill, formalism, and fable, is merely the science of conduct ... Yet religion is not ethics ... Ethics is a moral science ... Whilst religion is an applied science, applied namely to conduct. And any belief in revelation, any belief in the supernatural, if it fails to control conduct is of no more moment than a belief in the bunyip. (Furphy 1946:179)

The emphasis on right conduct inevitably led to the identification of true religion with mateship and therefore with unionism, for this, after all, was the organized manifestation of mateship.

Once it is accepted that religion implies a certain type of behaviour, without any necessary theological or religious dogma, then it can be accepted that the man practising mateship was the Christian.

To Lawson mateship was not so much a substitute for religion but the very quintessence of religion itself.

Lawson's ideal of the Christian was that of the true mate. In *That There Dog of Mine*, Macquarie, the main character, called his dog a Christian, because he had been a mate to him and had been true to him whatever the circumstances.

> That there dog ... is a better dog than I'm a man - or you too, it seems - and a better Christian. He's been a better mate to me than I ever was to any man - or any man to me. He's watched over me; kep' me from getting robbed many a time; fought for me; saved my life and took drunken kicks for thanks - and forgave me. He's been a true, straight, honest and faithful mate to me.

This was the outback's image of what a true Christian was - not one who had a certain belief, but one who acted in a certain way, one who was 'sorry for most men and all women, and tries to act up to it to the best of his ability, and if he ain't a Christian, God knows what is - I don't'. The true Christian was the understanding mate, a 'Good Samaritan'.

There were some Christians of whom he approved. Those who were sincere and showed their faith in action received his praise. Hence his eulogies of the Salvation Army. However, though he felt that the Army was doing praiseworthy work, religion in the form of an organized church like the Salvation Army was unnecessary.

> The bushmen are much too intelligent for the Army ... In case of sickness, accident, widows or orphans, the chaps send round the hat without banging a drum or testifying. For the rest, we work out our own salvation - or damnation - as the case is - in the bush, with no one to help us, except a mate, perhaps.

The true expression of Christianity, mateship, needed no organized church.

It is not difficult to over-emphasise the influence of Lawson and the 'mateship philosophy' in Australian life - while it is foolish to dismiss it. However, the emphasis upon morality as the essence of religion remained strong in the community. This was revealed again, for example, in the November 1951 document issued over the signatures of the national leaders of major churches and of senior judges throughout Australia. Entitled *A Call to the People*, it contained such statements as:

> We are in danger from moral and intellectual apathy, from the mortal enemies of mankind which sap the will and darken the understanding and breed evil dissensions. Unless these are withstood, we shall lack moral strength and moral unity sufficient to save our country and our liberties ... We believe, that each of us has a duty to deal fairly with his fellows in the transactions of life; that each has a duty to himself and to his fellows of honest work.

and, in line with the individualistic stress in much of religion, it added:

> We call on each Australian to examine his conscience and his motives in all his associations with his fellows. If each does his part, the whole community will be renewed. (Crowley 1973:254-255)[4]

That such a document forms an important link between the late 19th century and the Kavanagh article is clear. That the triumph of 'moralism' over the 'mysterium' has become established in the minds of most Australians, not without the support of church leaders, is also clear. The foundations laid in the first few decades were built upon securely in the first century, and further consolidated in the second one hundred years to the point of becoming an axiom - and one rooted in the attitudes and expectations of government and society. This axiom was watered by the emphases of clergy and judiciary, fertilised by the words of philosophers, novelists and poets, applied by formative thinkers in emerging trade unionism, and accepted as a given beyond dispute by a contemporary journalist, who in this would be representing the attitudes of most in the Australian community (and in a number of other places too).

That this is not a purely Australian phenomenon is clear from the statement of Karl Barth, with which this paper began. It may be paralleled in significant ways in the history of the U.S.A. (see, for example, Gabriel 1940: Chapter 3), for all the overt religiosity to be found there. Indeed it is difficult to argue any case but one which sees the culture within which religion (of the Judaeo-Christian varieties) was initiated and nurtured in Australia under white settlement as anything other than one which was imbued with the presumption that the *esse* of religion was 'moralism'. 'Mysterium' was an arcane optional extra embraced by a minority in the population - whereas 'moralism' was a demand on all.

Of course this in no way denies the fact that a number of Christians and Jews retained a due sense of the centrality of the 'mysterium'. Not least would this be found among Roman Catholics, although even there the vehement

advocacy of morality under curiously entitled 'Irish Jansenism' led many a Catholic to the sort of conclusions reached by the Protestant majority. And this in spite of the efforts of bishops and priests to maintain Catholic distinctions in the face of what they, and some like the Anglican Bishop Broughton saw as Australian 'indifferentism'. (See, for example, Shaw 1978:7, 58-64).[5]

The overall attitude of most of the white population may well have built bridges between those whose denominational differences were expressed only in respective 'rites of passage' and those who claimed no denominational allegiance at all. Indeed it was a contributing factor in the acceptance by many non-Catholics of a free-compulsory and secular system of education. At least all had in common an ethic which had its roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. They invested such an ethic, which they had secularised into 'mateship' and a local variant of the 'Golden Rule', with the status of the sacred (Ely 1980-81:553-66). But in doing so the teeth of religion were drawn and its faithful were marginalised in Australian society to be on a par with the faithful of the service clubs, except for religious leaders in the official protocol lists. In the latter they had an increasing air of antiquarian irrelevance.

There is, in recent years, little in the way of discernible change in this culture. Of course the Christian ingredients have altered somewhat, not least with the growth in the proportion of Orthodox and Pentecostals within the mix and in the numbers of those who in census returns claim to have 'no religion' or decline to answer the question concerned. And the emergence in Australia of significant numbers of Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus means that the culture is no longer dominated by the strains of Judaism and Christianity which for so long held undisputed sway. In addition there may be a contribution to be measured from the new appreciation of Aboriginal religions and the input they may bring into the local scene, not least in relating religion to the environment in a mutually constructive way. It would seem to be certain that the ingredients of the culture and the place of religions within it will be different in 2050 CE. Would that Vic Hayes and I were present to observe and report on it.

**   This paper draws on material contained in my Felix Arnott Lecture, *I Sing
         the Lord's Song in a Strange Land*, given at St. Francis Theological
         College, Milton, Queensland in August 1988, and later adapted in part for
         a paper read at the 1988 AASR Conference.

Notes

1   "Address to the Inhabitants", in N.K. Macintosh (1978:53). Here we may
         trace an echo of the 'mysterium' and some message of hope to those
         serving out their sentences.

2   See, for example, the comment of the Methodist, Lawry (1819) in
         Woolmington, *op.cit.*:147.

3   See, for example, the chapter by Hay in D. Hay *et al.* (1975).

4   See F.K. Crowley ed. (1973:254-255). Note that a *Call to the People* has
         a concomitant focus on the necessity for individual commitment rather
         than on the need for social change, such as is found in the statement from
         W.G. Spence. For a combination of the two see the Centennial essay of
         James Jefferis, entitled "Why has God sent us here?" in Turner
         (1968:111-114).

5   See, for example, G.P. Shaw (1978:7, 58-64). Note also his stress on
         morality in pp. 27-28, 39, 42, 60, 75 and 140.

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Verstehen at Home.
It's Unsettling Out There.

John Bodycomb

Introducing one of those fine anthologies he has edited for the AASR, Vic Hayes observed that several of his contributors "critique the dominance of western categories as distorting or irrelevant when applied to Eastern or primal traditions" (Hayes 1986:vii).

As an exemplary student of religions and cultures, Vic has sought to understand them from the inside, according to their own terms and the meanings they bear for their members; not to impose alien categories that function like tinted or distorting glass when we peer through them.

This quality of empathy or *Verstehen* will be increasingly necessary as the coming century unfolds. Indeed, it is already - for "the future is now", as Margaret Mead suggested (Mead 1970:76).

Phillip Ruthven, Executive Chair of the IBIS Group and respected forecaster, coolly informed the National Immigration Outlook Conference in November 1990 (Melbourne) that Australia 100 years hence would be one of the world's most cosmopolitan societies; moreover, that most of its 150 million would live at the 'Top End'!

He is on safe ground, of course, given that neither he nor his critics will be around then to gloat! Should he be correct, how is this cosmopolitan society likely to come about? Ruthven dismisses as nonsense the idea that Australia's population might be limited to 25 million.

> Try telling the Indonesians and others that the top one-third of Australia is useless - a land mass equal in size to Indonesia which has 178 million citizens compared with Australia's 0.52 million in the Top End. Incidentally, the Top End has nearly 60 percent of the nation's annual water resources, most of the nation's iron ore, natural gas, tidal energy, diamonds, bauxite, uranium, agricultural potential (for produce wanted by the Asia Pacific), tourism potential and so forth, and most of the nation's empty space. (Ruthven 1990:5)

Being of similar vintage, Vic Hayes and I were at school when Australia had less than 10 million population. About three quarters, it seemed, were named Brown, Smith or Jones - and the remaining quarter Kelly. Anglo-Celtic was the only society we knew. Where I lived in Melbourne, there was a fruiterer whose name was Tesoriero. There was also a Chinese market gardener named Ah Fat who hawked his produce in a canopied four-wheeler drawn by a sleep-walking horse. But these were very uncommon names: 'curiosities', one might say.

There were two religions, Protestant and Catholic. For reasons largely unknown, their adherents inherited a mutual animosity that surfaced in fights after school and was fed by a reservoir of apocryphal stories each told about the other. Although my mother said Catholics had the map of Ireland on their faces, I could never see it - but perhaps they had it on their hearts, and they remembered the discrimination their ancestors had met. There were a few Jewish boys whose families had migrated for reasons that escaped us, but they held no threats to the order we knew. Apart from the Protestant-Catholic animus, other cultures and religions were too small to worry us. Gillman says:

> It is sobering to consider that racism in Australia was limited more by the relatively small sizes of the minorities involved than by basic convictions about universal human worth. (Gillman 1988:28)

* * *

Differentiating between culture and religion is a slippery assignment, as is the definition of both terms. The concept of 'religion' as identifiable and quantifiable is both Western and modern. Wax called it "a folk category of the Western Judaeo-Christian tradition" (Wax 1967:224). Cantwell Smith considered the reification of religion a Western phenomenon. Of so-called 'non-civilised' peoples he noted that:

> none, apparently, has traditionally had a name for that system. Nor have these groups a term for religion in general. The persons concerned will say, "It is our custom to ...". (Smith 1964:52)

In fact, the slipperiness of the concept 'religion' led him to suggest that "the sustained inability to clarify what the word 'religion' signifies, in itself suggests that the term ought to be dropped!" (Smith 1964:21).

If some distinction between religion and culture in Australia were to be made, denoting related but separately identifiable phenomena, definitions of each could be made to serve this purpose. 'Religion' could be used to denote specifically church-related affiliations, attitudes and activities. 'Culture' could be used to denote those things about which the general populace might say, "It is our custom to ..."

However, the problem with this distinction is the typically ambivalent stance of many Australians in respect of organised religion. Its utility is clearly recognised in some terms, but not in others. The bulk of the population seem to value it as they value police, fire and ambulance services. These lend a certain security to one's world. At the same time, people fondly hope it will not be necessary to make frequent calls on them!

At census time, close to three-quarters of the population claim one or other religious 'brand loyalty' - but most without being active supporters of its organised activities. The majority would consider Australia to be a 'Christian' country, and if we place any store on census data, they would also consider Anglo-Celtic forms of Christianity to be normative. Furthermore, they would consider the major social institutions (health, education, welfare, law) to be founded upon and reflect 'Christian' principles interwoven with the best of Anglo-Celtic culture.

Hence, the lines become very blurred. The dominant religion and the dominant culture are not really amenable to separate treatment as though they could be clearly differentiated. Consequently, when one basic assumption of Australians appears to be called into question, others also are seen to be challenged. The three basic assumptions addressed here have been commonly held for close to 200 years. They are
(1)   The primacy of Anglo-Celtic culture
(2)   The primacy of Anglo-Celtic religion
(3)   The primacy of Christianity itself.

* * *

With the end of World War II, the relatively stable Australia in which I had grown up began to change - with increasing speed. Terms like 'Balt' and 'reffo' and 'New Australian' entered the language as catch-alls for an assortment of new arrivals who were not Anglo-Celtic. Further waves of immigration expanded the telephone directory with a plethora of names that bespoke Asian or

Middle Eastern sources. As is often the case with substantial waves of immigration, ethnic concentrations began to characterise some suburban areas. In 1988 the late David Penman (then the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne) said:

> For many it comes as a surprise to realise that Australia was mostly black until the 1830s, and that today our population of 15 million has 140 different ethnic peoples, using over 90 languages (apart from the 300 extant Aboriginal languages), and practises an incredible variety of religious traditions. (Penman 1988:xi)

That is to say, all three of the basic assumptions (above) were now facing challenge. The strength of the first was revealed in 1978 when the Victorian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs commissioned a survey of attitudes among Anglo-Australians in and around Melbourne. First step was to gather seventeen small groups who discussed immigration and its consequences. From what was said in these small groups came a list of eighty-six statements reflecting a range of attitudes, for example, "Migrants are taking jobs from Australians and making unemployment worse", "I think my family would benefit from having migrants in the street".

In scrambled order, these statements became the substance of a self-scoring questionnaire. On a seven point scale respondents indicated agreement or disagreement with each. A sample of one thousand homes was drawn, mainly from Melbourne, with one person being interviewed in each.

Respondents were sorted into four groups, 'conscious bigots' 31 percent, 'unconscious bigots' 18 percent, 'muddy middle' 29 percent, and 'cosmopolitan' 22 percent. That is to say, half the sample were typed as 'bigots', less than one-quarter as 'cosmopolitan' - and the remainder as being somewhere in between.

The so-called bigots were not found to be over-represented in any particular group; they were fairly evenly distributed. However, 'cosmopolitans' tended to predominate among the younger, the tertiary educated and those who had travelled; that is, among those who might be expected to have broader sympathies.

When a distinguished historian suggested in the 80s a more careful monitoring of immigration, he was tagged as a bigot. In fact, he was endeavouring to say that there are generally limits in a people's ability to take into itself those who increase the plurality of origins, cultures and worldviews.

He suggested there was a theoretical 'saturation point', and that Australia needed to guard against over-straining its capacity to respond positively.

There is no shortage of evidence to support this. It seems not unlikely that if the Melbourne study of 1978 were replicated, results could be similar. A study conducted between 1984 and 1988 involved sending matched pairs of job applications; one purporting to be from an Anglo-Celtic Australian, and the other from a Greek or Vietnamese. Factors such as age, experience and qualifications were identical in all pairings.

Of 157 employers who responded with offers of an interview, 96 invited both Anglo-Celtic and Vietnamese applicants; 52 (or one-third) invited only the Anglo-Celtic. Only 9 offered an interview solely to the Vietnamese. In the Anglo-Celtic/Greek experiment, 135 employers invited both applicants for interview; 25 (one-fifth) invited only the Anglo-Celts, and 10 offered interviews only to the Greeks. (Riach and Rich 1991:239-256)

In July 1989 the Australian Prime Minister, R.J. Hawke, launched the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.* He said:

> It was the first time that any Commonwealth Government had set down such a clear definition of multiculturalism and committed itself to such a comprehensive package of initiatives in this area. (1990:3)

Three dimensions of 'multiculturalism' were identified (*ibid.*:69):

(1) **Cultural identity**, the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including language and religion

(2) **Social justice**, the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or birthplace

(3) **Economic efficiency**, the need to maintain, develop and use effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background.[1]

A major objective at least implicit in this program is to challenge the normative status of Anglo-Celtic culture: to ensure that all people living in Australia should be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion or culture. This includes freedom from intolerance and prejudice within the established systems of Australian society. The goals are lofty indeed; only

time will tell whether Governments and people have the resolve needed for their achievement.

Ramifications for the dominant religious groups have not been explicated in detail, but are as significant as they are for the dominant culture. They can be seen to include:

(1)   Repudiation of special status, privilege and power for any one religion at the expense of others.

(2)   The implication that no religion may infringe the liberties or freedom of expression of another.

(3)   The further implication that any religion which claims among its objectives the building of a truly human society, *ipso facto* has an obligation to defend the rights of another (as well as defending its own, of course).

<center>* * *</center>

Along with the movement toward 'multiculturalism' is the parallel movement toward 'multi-credalism'. Penman's "incredible variety of religious traditions" (*op.cit.*) expands into larger and larger numbers of groups depending on the categories used.

Hughes and others found thirty-nine Christian denominations and five major non-Christian groups, namely, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs (Bentley et al. 1990). Gillman lists forty-six major religious groups, of which fifteen are other than Christian (Gillman *op. cit.*). Humphreys and Ward list a bewildering 127 Christian groups, and 89 other religious communities (Humphreys and Ward 1986). They note that alongside the convergence (ecumenism) among mainstream denominations, there is also a trend toward invention and diversification.

> Ecumenism - the movement which seeks to further the organisational union of Christians of different traditions - has been influential in producing a more cordial spirit between churches. However, it is evident that individual convictions are still alive and well, and if anything the church scene is becoming more varied rather than less. (*Ibid.*:3)

Trompf seems to have picked this up earlier and forecast that it could be expected to continue. His classification suggested an even wider variety; "Detailed research has revealed that there are at least 500 distinct religious

traditions, denominations, sects, and cultic organisations in Australia" (Trompf 1981:21). Furthermore, he prefigured Humphreys and Ward in adding that "What is certain is that there will continue to be growth in religious pluralism in Australia" (*ibid*.:22).

Leaving aside temporarily those religions other than Christian, it would seem that the mainstream denominations are embracing a form of cultural pluralism, inasmuch as they have numerous ethnic congregations and fellowships which are being encouraged to retain their own identity. For example, the Uniting Church in Victoria alone contains Arabic, Assyrian, Cambodian, Chinese, Cook Islander, Fijian, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Korean, Macedonian, Papua New Guinean, Samoan, Tongan and Vietnamese congregations and fellowships - in many cases with their own ethnic pastors.[2] The ethnic origins of its members will ensure for some time that the Uniting Church is predominantly Anglo-Celtic; however, the assumption that this is 'normative' is being called into question.

A similar situation has obtained with the Australian Catholic Church, for 170 years predominantly Irish. Kaluski (1988:103) identifies 1947 as the beginning of the end of Irish dominance; the year when mass migration began. He notes how Australian Catholic Bishops were initially nonplussed and sent representatives to USA for counsel from the American hierarchy. In consequence, a decision was taken not to allow the establishment of ethnic parishes. However, this 'assimilationist' policy was dropped in the early 70s. Kaluski quotes from two reports in *The Advocate*:

> The Church cannot afford to overlook the pastoral needs of even the smallest migrant group.

> While it is necessary to help overseas born Australians to become participating members of their parish, their spiritual heritage must not only be tolerated but positively appreciated. (*Ibid*.:22)

As this is written, it is too soon for data from the 1991 census to be available. However, an educated guess is that the ratio between 'Christian' and 'non-Christian' religious affiliation is likely to have changed in favour of the latter. The 1986 census found 73 percent of the population claiming one or other Christian brand loyalty, and 2 percent claiming affiliation with a non-Christian religion. The largest groups were Jewish 69,100 (0.4 percent), Buddhist 80,400 (0.5 percent), and Muslim 109,500 (0.7 percent).

Jewish leaders suggest their numbers may be higher than shown. With many being Holocaust survivors or their progeny, there is a deep-seated disinclination to disclose their Jewishness on a form. Muslim leaders have disputed the census results, suggesting that their numbers are closer to 300,000. Certainly Islam is the largest non-Christian religion in Australia and it is also the fastest growing.

The Muslim presence is unsettling for several reasons, not least being that the bulk of Australians mistakenly believe it to be an homogeneous and monolithic system, both religiously and ethnically. To the average Australian 'Arab' and 'Muslim' are interchangeable terms. Gillman stresses the importance therefore of distinguishing between:

> Islam as a belief system with its spiritual and religious principles on the one hand, and the political and sociological manifestations in Islamic countries. The latter, although influenced in varying degrees by Islamic teachings, are also the product of other complex factors. It is misleading to speak of 'Islam' in an undifferentiated way or, worse still, to use it emotively. (Gillman 1988:218-219)

Gillman notes that in addition to some 80 percent of their number coming from Lebanon and Turkey:

> there are Muslim migrants from Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, North Africa and other Arab countries, and from Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, East and South Africa, Albania and Yugoslavia. (*Ibid*.:224).

It is this equating of 'Arab' and 'Muslim' which led, especially during the Gulf War, to an increase in reports of harassment in school, neighbourhood and workplace of persons from Arabic-speaking backgrounds or of the Muslim faith. The assumed nexus between nationality and religion has much to do with the hesitancy, if not downright hostility, with which Australians respond to the Muslim presence. Montgomery argues that:

> Acceptance, rejection or mixed acceptance of religions introduced from the outside are highly dependent on intersocietal relations in which receiving societies perceive themselves to be threatened by the society from which the religion comes or by other societies (Montgomery 1991:37-53).

* * *

Implications in the foregoing for Australian Christians and Christianity are several and varied. At the most elemental level, it can be argued that there is a need for **information and education** in respect of other cultures and creeds. There is no reason to believe that Christians and church people are any less subject to ignorance and to the practice of 'stereotyping' than members of the larger society. Because they are citizens, but the more so because of their religious protestations, it can be argued that Christians in Australia have no excuse! Moreover, this is especially so in respect of the two other 'religions of the book'.

> In the three-fold cord of monotheism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are supra-human, based on the direct revelation from God, Islam is the last of the Revealed truths and Muhammad is the last and the seal of the Prophets and messengers of God from the standpoint of a Muslim believer.
>
> And of all three monotheistic religions, Islam is today **the most misunderstood and misrepresented through ignorance, prejudice, deliberate distortion or cognitive dissonance from within and without.** (El Erian 1986:1, my emphasis)

Although the stereotypes may be less bizarre in the case of Jews and Judaism, they have nonetheless been held tenaciously and in the most insidious ways reinforced by Christian scripture and preaching. Organisations such as the Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria), together with denominational and ecumenical working groups, have been addressing these issues in the past decade. More recently, there have been modest efforts to correct misconceptions about Islam and the assorted settlers in this country who are Muslims.[2]

Second, of course, is the matter of **freedom of expression** - both of culture and specifically of religion. We have already noted the formal commitment of the Federal Government in the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, and that religious bodies cannot consider themselves excused from this commitment. Indeed, as John Brown of the Uniting Church observes, this must be seen as a tenet of faith for those who stand in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

> Anti-racism and love for a minority racial group is not something peripheral to the faith. It is central to the faith. It arises out of the very self-understanding of the faithful. (Brown 1988:67)

It is sometimes argued that religious freedom is guaranteed within the Australian Constitution, and that no one need worry about it being transgressed.

On the contrary, the Constitution has assumed religious freedom, but it has not guaranteed it. The *United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights* goes much further.

> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice and worship and observance. (Article 18)

It would be hard to argue against the explicit statement of such a right in Australia, and in fact the *National Agenda* makes this statement in its own way. Likewise, it would be hard to justify any ecclesiastical rebuttal of such a right. Rather, it seems axiomatic that religious communities in a religiously pluralistic society will be as committed to the defence of others' freedom as they are to their own - on grounds of enlightened self-interest, if nothing else! However, there are loftier grounds. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council issued a statement which said:

> The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, colour, condition in life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this Sacred Synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to maintain good fellowship among the nations (1 Peter 2:12) and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men, so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.[3]

If taking steps to learn about other religions on their own terms, and defending the right to a place in the sun for those with whom we disagree, present difficulties for some Christians (as indeed they do!), then the matter of **inter-faith dialogue** is very much more problematic. Indeed, the question of whether or not Christians should engage in dialogue with other faiths is already one of the most divisive issues among them - to which we must now turn.

* * *

Although it was often portrayed in terms of church authority, doctrine and style, the Protestant-Catholic animus also had much to do with justifiable disaffection of Irish immigrants - both 'forced' and free settlers. In the nineteenth century 'mother church' was the rallying ground in a battle twixt the

Irish and the rest. But by the 1960s an obvious change was taking place between Protestant and Catholic churches. O'Farrell finds the major stimulus to be two-fold, namely the ecumenical decrees of the Vatican Council and the growing 'secularity' of Australian society.

> The secular society was becoming the 'permissive' society - indeed militantly permissive - and the churches drew together under common threat (O'Farrell 1977:421).

However, parallel with this 'ecumenical' or convergence movement, there was another development: the diversification and multiplication of religious groups in Australia. The influx of Greek migrants raised the profile of Orthodoxy. Pentecostal churches began to multiply in response to the growing secularity and to the theologically flaccid state of mainstream churches. Fundamentalist, evangelical and charismatic elements developed within the latter in response to the perceived need for revival.

Although some of the old divisions have been withering away, new divisions are replacing them. Following Ninian Smart, one is obliged to question whether it is now possible to speak of one 'Christianity' at all. In Australia there now seem to be many Christianities, with what sometimes appear to be almost insuperable differences. Tony Johns' observation is pertinent:

> The mainstream middle-class Indonesian Muslim and the mainstream middle-class Australian Christian are far closer to each other than the Muslim would be to a bearded extremist, or the Christian to those deep South communities of Christians in the USA who pass around rattlesnakes to each other after Sunday morning service ... (Johns 1991:4).

The singular point of contention revolves around Christianity's relationship to other faiths - especially Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Many who see themselves as committed evangelicals claim a divine mandate for delivering the 'lost'. Although seldom stating their position in such crude terms, they find the full, final and normative status of Christian truth a warrant for eradicating other meaning systems - as incomplete, defective or downright false.

> There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men are perishing because of sin, but God loves all men, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. (Lausanne Covenant)

In contrast, many who see themselves as committed ecumenicals have been seeking to understand and appreciate other religious traditions, exploring concepts like divine 'versatility' and revelational 'variety' as ground for peaceful co-existence, and tentatively venturing into inter-faith dialogue. For them, the issue is how to affirm Christian uniqueness while, at the same time, accepting the possibility that God may have other ways of self-disclosure to other peoples from other cultures and histories.

Alongside this has been the small but significant uncovering of Aboriginal religion as a source of rich and illuminating insight into the relationship between nature, humanity and God. On the global level population movements, increased travel and the explosion of mass communication have made it far more difficult for individual religions to remain unaffected by the existence of others. The growing awareness of earth as a 'global city' [4] exerts its own pressure on major religions to talk civilly with each other, at the very least!

> For the various religious traditions have now in common the fact that each is being carried by persons who are increasingly involved in the same situations. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and the others are for the first time being faced with a joint challenge: to collaborate in building a common world. This must be not only the kind of world in which we can all live together, but one also of which we can jointly approve, and to the building and sustaining of which the faith of each of us can effectively inspire. (Smith 1981:192)

It seems not unlikely that the major debate and division between Australian Christians could pivot around this issue. Where the old ructions were between Catholic and Protestant, the new may take the form of equally acrimonious conflict between 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical'. For the conservative evangelical Christian, dialogue means 'selling out'. Being prepared to listen to the other amounts to conceding that he may have something to say from which we could benefit. This is very hard to handle if one believes he has a monopoly on revealed truth. In passing, it must be remembered that a similar stance is found in Islam; for many strict Muslims dialogue is as inappropriate as it is for conservative evangelical Christians.

In fact, dialogue is possible **only** between parties who are clear in what they believe, and strongly committed to those belief systems. Moreover, one cannot claim that dialogue is taking place if all the issues on which differences are known to exist are studiously avoided. The World Council of Churches' Wesley Ariarajah reminds us that:

> Dialogue does not exclude witness. In fact, where people have no
> convictions to share, there can be no real dialogue. (Ariarajah
> 1985:39)

It would seem that clarity of belief and commitment to it need not be inimical to inter-faith dialogue. Yap Kim Hao, who finds cultural and religious pluralism to be "the very stuff of reality" (Yap 1990:15), affirms that Christianity is a 'true' religion - but that this does not have to mean it is final and absolute.

> We acknowledge the work of God's Spirit in the past and the
> continuing presence and power of the Spirit to reveal new truths.
> (*Ibid.*:102)

Yap speaks for many Asian Christians, who have long had to work out the meaning of faithfulness in a context of pluralism, when he stresses the necessity for dialogue between faiths.

In the end, it is this realisation that we inhabit the same small planet, occupy neighbouring allotments on it and are collectively responsible for its future, which obliges us to make the first decision, namely, whether or not to get acquainted with other cultures. In fact, this is no longer an option. When this type of meeting takes place, inevitably there will be discoveries about one another; specifically of what each holds to be sacred truth, heaven-sent clues to the meaning of existence.

In *God has Many Names*, John Hick shared his own story - turning a faceless academic into a pilgrim. Hick grew up Anglican, dabbled in Theosophy, and as an undergraduate had a resounding conversion, in which the heavens opened and his world was brightly illumined by the Christian gospel. He became a thorough-going evangelical (he says 'fundamentalist'), identifying with Inter-varsity Fellowship and Christian Union.

After a short time teaching in the USA, he returned to England, to take up an appointment in Birmingham. There he found substantial Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities. He became involved with the problems of cultural interaction between these people, and the older inhabitants of the city. In visiting the former's places of worship, Hick came to see that:

> When you visit the various non-Christian places of worship in one of
> our big cities you discover - possibly with a shock of surprise - that
> phenomenologically (or in other words, to human observation) the
> same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church.
> That is to say, human beings are coming together to open their minds

to a higher reality, which is thought of as the personal creator and Lord of the universe, and as making vital moral demands upon the lives of men and women. (Hick 1980:5)

Hick moved inexorably towards the conviction that, although the forms were different (as are cultures and languages), behind and beyond all forms lay the same higher reality.   In explicating his position, he reiterated Kant's distinction between the *noumenal* (thing in itself) and the *phenomenal* (thing as it appears). The 'higher reality' itself had to be distinguished from the manner in which it appeared to finite minds, shaped by this culture or that. In this, Hick chose worthy companions. Meister Eckhart distinguished between Godhead and God, Martin Luther between the Hidden God and the Revealed God, Paul Tillich between the theistic God and the God above theism. Whilst reluctant to make extravagant promises for dialogue, much less confident predictions, Hick concluded:

What can be said with assurance is that each of the great streams of faith within which human life is lived can learn from the others; and that any hope for the future lies largely in the world ecumenical dialogue which is taking place in so many ways and at so many levels. (*Ibid.*:97)

Perhaps it is not too much to pray for, that Hick's discovery may become in some ways 'archetypal' for Australian Christians.   At this stage of proceedings, it is more hope than reality.

* * *

Notes

1   For example, the Australian Council of Churches' Commission on Living Faiths and Community Relations, based in Melbourne, has prepared material with this objective in view.

2   Directory, UCA Synod of Victoria, 1990.

3   "Vatican II and the Jews" (1966), (Part 4 of the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*).

4   The more commonly heard expression 'global village' conveys the idea of contracted space. However, 'city' is preferred on the ground that a village is culturally homogeneous - whereas a city is heterogeneous.

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Reinventing the Eternal:
Aboriginal Spirituality and Modernity

Tony Swain

Aboriginal religion, famed for its eternal Dreaming, has recently been reinvented. It now has a new structure, coherent and widely endorsed and yet, thus far no one has considered it worthy of investigation. This paper is a preliminary attempt to redress this situation.

Before I begin, there are three features of traditional Aboriginal religion which I must establish as a background against which to sketch my exposition. First, as is well known, Dreaming events and narratives do not traditionally have a temporal component; they are abiding, enduring, or to put the matter negatively, ahistorical. Second, they are therefore not cosmogonic and indeed contain no reference to the creation of the world as a whole. Rather they are concerned with the myriad transformations which give particular sites their immanent significance. A corollary to this second point is that these traditions are never universalistic nor envision the Earth *in toto* but are instead entirely pluralistic and locative. The third point to be borne in mind is that the focus of traditional religion was on learning one's own spiritual identity as a person who was a manifestation of the sacred essence of a specific site. This was achieved by educating novices, and hence was a cognitive acquisition; it was not primarily an affective appreciation nor an emotive conversion.

These qualities of Aboriginal religious traditions are well established (for full documentation see Swain: forthcoming: chapter 1), but they raise a particularly thorny dilemma for Aboriginal people who, because of colonial disruption, did not receive a traditional education. Such people may know who some of their kinfolk were, but they cannot know the complex details of specific stories and sites. If religious education is not open to them, how do they find their place? What effect does having to forge new kinds of links with the land have on the understanding of the land itself? And insofar as it has become necessary to re-establish such ties after a long duration of separation, is not

Aboriginal religious thought therefore of necessity thrust towards temporality? These are the cardinal issues I want to explore in this paper.

The sources on which creative Aboriginal thinkers (my survey includes artists, novelists, poets, storytellers, songwriters, dancers and musicians) who are engaged in the process can draw, are indeed as wide as the world. They include not only Christian traditions (some seventy percent of Aboriginal people registered themselves as Christians in the last census) but also the images of pop culture, ecology, the New Age and so on.

Consider, for instance the influences in life - and previous lives! - of Australia's first Aboriginal novelist, Colin Johnson (now Mudrooroo Nyoongah). Raised in a non-"bush" Aboriginal family, he was taken to a regimental Christian Brothers Orphanage/High School and then to jail before coming into contact with the Aboriginal Advancement League (a predominantly Protestant Aboriginal organisation). Soon after, he wrote *Wild Cat Falling* (1965), a book also revealing a smattering of French existential thought. Having heard of Buddha in jail, he then travelled to South-East Asia, India and Pakistan, learned some Sanskrit and Pali and became a Buddhist monk for three years, before returning to Australia to write *Long Live Sandawarra* (1979) and *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the End of the World* (1983), and most recently, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991). Each of his novels has had a great impact on Aboriginal literature and thought, and while Johnson has recently argued all authentic Aboriginal literature must refer to that reality encapsulated by the word "Dreaming", we are left considering precisely what that term might now entail. After all, Johnson himself had previously insisted that "All existence is *Dukkha* - suffering ... Thus to be an Aborigine ... is to suffer ... it is your *Karma* to be an Aborigine." (Beier and Johnson 1985:73)

Other Aboriginal reworking of spiritual ideals are even more eclectic. New Age and religio-environmentalist outlooks, for example, are evident in a Bandjalang person's description of "cosmic energy around the planet" (Williams 1986:8) which is focused on Nimbin, or in Gaboo Ted Thomas' rally to gather Aborigines, Maoris, Native Americans and environmentalists together at Uluru (Ayers Rock) in order to "rebirth the earth" (I quote from the publicity flyer). When we hear Aborigines saying "in our tribal legends, we came here, not by land, not by water, but by spaceship" (ABC 1989), we realise there really is no limit to possible sources of inspiration behind the reshaping of "traditional" Aboriginal beliefs.

Eden Dreaming and the Fall of 1788

Given the diversity of sources for ideas, it is a sign of a strong sense of shared identity by Aborigines that there is nonetheless a discernible form to a new all-Aboriginal macro-myth, which I will attempt to articulate in the following pages. The first thing to note of the new myth of the old Law is that it is heavily temporised, even dated. The period of the Dreaming is equated with the time before colonisation and is somewhat synonymous with traditional life. This era is spoken of as beginning 40,000 years ago (some now use other dates reflecting more recent archaeological opinion), and ended, abruptly, in 1788. Not only does the myth seem to incorporate a Judaeo-Christian concern with temporality and historicity, it also reveals a part of its cosmogonic pattern. For the pre-colonial period is invariably depicted as an idyllic eco-Eden, while 1788 surely marks what can only be termed the Fall.

My first illustrations of the new myth are taken from the well known poet and essayist Kevin Gilbert. He writes:

> Our Beginning, our Dreamtime, or creation occurred in this land. Our moment of creation, our "Garden of Eden" began here. We are the oldest continuous and cohesive and developed society of mankind in the world.

Having conflated Aboriginal existence in Australia with the Dreaming, he then goes onto elaborate on Eden.

> Our laws, given by nature, carved into the landscape, drawn upon the rocks, enabled us to pass the stage of mass slaughter for lands, of murder without reciprocal response. Our laws governed the sharing of resources, caring for every member of our society, the sanctity of all forms of life and the earth from whence we came and continued in sanctity as part thereof. Our people, our land, are based upon justice and universal humanity within our sovereign domain. (Gilbert 1987:83)

The image of the period before the fall of 1788 is invariably idyllic and cast in terms designed to contrast with the flawed world of post-colonial society. The "Eden" era was a time without strife or conflict, war or violence, famine or ecological devastation, and was based on holistic principles of caring, sharing and community unity. The opening words of the Aboriginal plenary to the World Council of Churches captures precisely this notion and, significantly, aligns it with Biblical thought:

> From the beginning of time, the Aboriginal people lived in peace and harmony with the land, maintaining God's integrity with the land. Our laws are as close as the Bible. We are to share everything equally; we are to love our brothers and sisters, we are not to steal; we are to care for the land, and to respect every living thing. So, in general, our people are very spiritual, loving, caring and sharing people. (World Council of Churches 1990:1)

I am not implying that all these things - the love and care - were not present in traditional life, but it seems fair to note a shift so that these things are now said to **define** that lifestyle which was shattered in 1788.

1788 is a year of mythic significance to all Australians, but with highly contrasting connotations. In Australia's Bicentenary year the White civic ritual of re-enacting the arrival of the First Fleet was a ritual in which Aborigines, en mass but uninvited, were determined to share. It was a ceremonial re-enactment with dual significance, and had the organisers not backed down on their plans to replant the British flag, violence may have been unavoidable, for it is quite certain Aboriginal people would not have allowed this to occur unhindered. For them, that act was a celebration of the serpent undermining Eden.

The anti-hero, however, is not Phillip, who captained the First Fleet, but Captain Cook, who had claimed Australia for George III eighteen years earlier. Captain Cook is the archetypal lying and thieving White person, and his mythic significance is widespread amongst Aboriginal Australia, not only in urban areas but equally in regions such as the Kimberley, Arnhem Land and Cape York. Representative, although particularly creative, is the Yolngu man Paddy Wainburranga's story of Captain Cook, which has been publicised widely in Aboriginal Australia in the form of a poster. Wainburranga conceived of an original Captain Cook who was a Lawman who killed Satan in Sydney. The historic James Cook, however, was one of the breed of new Captain Cooks who stole land and women from Aborigines.

> The New Captain Cooks shot the people, They killed the women, these new people. They called themselves "New Captain Cooks" ... All the Captain Cook mob came and called themselves "welfare mob". They wanted to take all of Australia. (Mackinolty and Wainburranga 1988:359)

This nicely expresses that Captain Cook's mythic significance is not as a man of 1770, but as a symbol of the principle of theft which began then and has continued ever since.

In comparison with traditional localised myths which neither condemn nor praise Ancestral events, the new macro-pan-Aboriginal myth has a conspicuously Biblical structure in its temporality, its image of a utopian Eden of the past, and its conception of the fall. But even more strikingly comparable to Christian cosmic plans is another theme of contemporary Aboriginal spirituality which was absent in the past - the idea of worldly salvation, in this case brought into being by a people reclaiming their identity, their place in Aboriginal society and their relationship with the land.

Reclaiming a Place

While contemporary images of their past emphasise an ideal world which as been denied to recent generations, there is nevertheless an immense faith in Aboriginality and a spirit of cultural revival. Jimmy Chi's musical, with the rather millennial title of *Bran Nue Dae*, not only draws attention to the tyranny of missions (it opens with the Pallotine Catholic mission of Lombardina) and a history of injustice and racism, but is equally rich in a sense of hope, reconciliation, and the capacity for Aboriginality to survive seemingly overwhelming odds.

> There's nothing I would rather be,
> than to be an Aborigine ...
> Now you may think I'm cheeky
> but I'd be satisfied,
> to rebuild your convict ships,
> and sail you on the tide. (Chi and Kuckles 1991:15)

These words, belonging to a show which has captivated both white and Aboriginal audiences, should be read as indicating symbolic rather than a literal reversal of the colonial process. It offers a re-emergence of the Aboriginal spirit. As one Aboriginal woman expressed it:

> There has been an amazing re-birth of Aboriginal identity - not a re-birth, I think it's coming out from underground, and the fact that we are the oldest living creature on the planet, it just ... it's just fantastic. (ABC 1989)

Re-birth? Re-emergence? Perhaps Bob Randall, the well-known Aboriginal song-writer (who wrote the classic "Brown Skinned Baby"), chose the most apt image, saying "when I think about the butterfly that's in its cocoon, and then there is a rebirth, a reawakening of another animal that changed in the

cocoon, into something **totally** different, **totally** beautiful and with life - that is the Aboriginal spirit to me; that was always there, still is there, and always will be there". (ABC:1990) That the spirit we document belongs truly to the First Australians is evident. That it has radically transformed itself so that, like caterpillar and butterfly, the life is all but totally new, is equally evident. My task here is to try to specify just what that transformation has entailed.

At a national conference, *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past-Present-Future*, which I was involved in organising, I repeatedly noted one key aspect of the re-emergence of spiritual connection in Aboriginal Australia. This is a shift to the use of affective, intuitive knowledge or supernatural intervention to help people to find their place in the world. As I have noted, traditionally, such associations were learned through a lifelong education and formal initiation, but these avenues are no longer open to many Aborigines. Two examples of the new land-connection process will make the difference apparent. In the first case, a man who was employed to record sites in Central Queensland could not find a particular old ceremonial ground clearly located on his map. So, abandoning his compass, he let his feelings guide him and was led by the sensing of the sacred power of the land. He returned to this place frequently, but on one occasion when he brought with him an Aboriginal friend, it was once more totally elusive. They realised this was a place significant to the first man, but not intended for his companion.

The other example involved a woman who was raised by a loving white family but who nonetheless felt torn between the culture in which she was raised and one as yet unknown to her. The sense of conflict was so strong she was admitted to a psychiatric institution. There she was visited by two traditional doctors, who no other person saw, and this marked her determination to re-establish her roots, which she did with profound success.

What is implicitly intriguing in these accounts, and what is declared explicitly by many Aboriginal people in urban and rural Australia, is that being an Aborigine is something in their **blood**. If they are denied a traditional education (and here must be once again emphasised that Aboriginal people in remote Australia stress culture and a learned Law rather than blood in establishing identity) then they can re-establish connection by drawing on their capacities which are part of being an Aborigine. Another incident, this time from the country of the Darkinung people (near Newcastle, New South Wales) illustrates my point. At a place an Aboriginal group saw the image of their old people manifest itself. The leader proclaimed the land, unbeknown to them, was

sacred, and that all present should draw on the power being offered by the past generations. The relator of the story then added:

> We've all got that spiritual contact inside us. Because of our blood: no matter what colour we are, whether we are fair or creamy or black or blue. Aboriginal people are in all colours ... They think we've lost our spiritual contact, but we haven't; it's all inside us; it can come out of us. (ABC 1989)

It is evident in several of the quotations I have given that land remains prevalent in contemporary Australian discussion of their spirituality. What has changed is the relationship with the land. Amongst a people who have lived with an enforced breach from their place, reconnection requires something which can transcend cultural continuity. This is "blood", which signifies an instinctive sense of Aboriginality contained in any genealogical link with other Aboriginal people of the past or present. "Blood" is something which need not even be consciously realised, in which case the spiritual quest is something akin to Platonic anamnesis - the re-learning of what is known at an unconscious level. Sally Morgan's sense of discovery in *My Place* speaks for many Aboriginal Australians whose nagging intuitive awareness of their true (Aboriginal) selves has in time overridden their overt understanding that their forebears were "wogs" or some other immigrant people.

I will say something more of reconnecting with land when we turn in a moment of consider Mother Earth. Before I do, however, it is necessary to note that a re-established sense of place is something that can permeate all of life. Amongst people who, to employ their own image of re-birth, are born-again Aborigines, there is a zealous spiritual pride which institutes a vision of salvation through connection. This is evident, for example, in peoples' concern not only to find which land their fore-bears occupied but also in their quest to trace unknown relatives. Aboriginal organisations such as Link-Up have indeed a spiritual mission.

At a national level, reclaiming a sense of community place is symbolised most noticeably in the concern to remove secular academic control over ancient skeletal remains and transfer it to Aborigines. When activist Michael Mansell says:

> The bottom line here is that if people tamper with the bones of the dead, so far as Aboriginal people are concerned, they tamper with the spirits of the dead. When the spirits of the dead are disturbed it is a bloody insult to Aboriginal people.

he almost certainly does not articulate the beliefs of those Aborigines who buried the bodies long ago. But before archaeologists gleefully employ this argument in their own defence (as they frequently do) it must be asked whether the significance of skeletons, and their proposed re-burial should be construed in terms of a fixed past doctrine or an ongoing, rapidly changing, Aboriginal tradition. For the contemporary Aborigine, Mansell speaks accurately for the caring for bones which they claim as their own part of the spiritual drive to re-connect with their place.

Speaking generally, the re-birth of the Aboriginal spirit, that sense of overcoming the loss which came with the fall of 1788, and of allowing "blood" to re-connect Aboriginal people with place and family, is said to bring healing from the personal and social effects of colonisation. In a manner akin to that in which Christians (including Aboriginal Christians) profess to have been saved by the Lord from a life of self-destructive meaninglessness, so too Aborigines reclaiming their Aboriginality speak of its redemptive powers. Indeed, the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Services, for example, considers connections of family and faith to be essential to Aboriginal well-being.

I have so far described contemporary Aboriginal spirituality thus: employing something of a Judaeo-Christian cosmic structure, Aboriginal people in rural and urban contexts speak of an Eden-like Dreaming which endured for 40,000 years but which was defiled in 1788. The loss and theft - symbolised quintessentially in Captain Cook - was devastating, but salvation is possible, is in fact coming, through re-establishing contacts with place in both its geographical and social sense. This link is re-established by an unforeseen avenue of continuity - "blood" - which allows the Aboriginal spirit to rise re-born like a phoenix even though all around believe it delivered to ashes.

This appears to me a fair distillation of the most common contemporary Aboriginal spiritual voice. Were this all, however, it would contain a hollow. For while there is a sense of spiritual awakening through affirming one's Aboriginality and asserting one's connection within the Aboriginal world, it cannot be denied that "blood", whatever it might transmit, does not transmit those stories and ceremonies which provide the Absolute link between specific people and specific places. "Blood" might feasibly be said to give one a sense of orientation of Aboriginality, but it cannot be expected to offer details of the old Law.

It is this which has led to a most important aspect of the metamorphosis of Aboriginal Spirituality, and one which allows it to sit comfortably with

principles of Christian thought and life. For it seems Aborigines today increasingly define Aboriginality in terms of **how** they relate to the land rather than **to which** lands they are related. Theirs is a **sense** of place rather than a **knowledge** of their specific site. This suggests a loss of pluralism in the new Pan-Aboriginal world-view, which is perfectly encapsulated by a new mythic image which not only speaks of **the** land to which Aborigines relate but also sits complementarily with the God of Heaven of Christendom. That new image is Mother Earth.

Mother Earth

Up until a decade or so ago, we have no evidence of Aboriginal people referring to "Mother Earth" (see Swain 1991).[1] Only recently has she emerged to encapsulate the new relationship between Aborigines and land. Insofar as ecologists too appeal to Mother Earth, the concept instantly evokes the understanding that Aborigines treat the world differently to Europeans, thus placing emphasis on the **how** rather than the **where** of land associations. On the other hand, the image is also current among feminists and others who would redress the dominance of the otherworldly male God of popular Christian thought and so contrasts complementarily with the idea of general immanent and indigenous religious principle. While Mother Earth clearly expresses a negative image of much of orthodox Western Christian symbolism, she does not in fact counter its notion of a single world, a single people and a unified (or unified pair) Godhead. It is thus that the new Aboriginal spirituality has emerged alongside the rise of Aboriginal evangelical Christianity - indeed in some cases the same people are involved on both fronts.

In one of the earliest manifestations of Mother Earth, she had already revealed herself as part of a complementary pair. Kath Walker's (Oodgeroo Noonuccal's) *Father Sky, Mother Earth* (1981) is a creation story in which two beings of the title give birth to the natural world. All is well until one day high-technology-endowed humans destroy the ecological balance with guns, bulldozers and pollutants - all culminating in an image of Mother Earth's body pierced with placards erected in her defence.

In contrast to Noonuccal's children's story, the earliest unambiguous reference to an actual belief in a Mother Earth which I have encountered is a phrase used by Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra, Moderator of the Uniting Church in the Northern Territory. He said:

> The land is my mother... When the land is taken from us or destroyed,
> we feel hurt because we belong to the land and we are part of it...
> When we become Christians, we see more clearly our relationship
> with the land and with God. It was God who entrusted the land to our
> ancestors. We were living in the land of plenty, like the first creation
> people. We had our own technology, our own social laws, our own
> pattern to follow. Life was so beautiful before.
>
> I'm sorry to say it, but I picture oppressors, both *yolngu*
> (Aboriginal) and *balanda* (White), coming into our garden of Eden
> like a snake. Satan used the snake as his instrument to tempt God's
> people and to try to destroy God's plan for his people. The bad
> influence came in breaking our relationship with God, with man, and
> the Land. We never dreamed that one day the bulldozers would come
> in. (Gondarra 1980:8-9)

Mother Earth is not referred to again and it seems evident that Gondarra's
reference to "the Land is my Mother" is used in a broad impressionistic sense.
He employs her to define Aboriginal traditions against the Christian Sky Father,
who in his theology breathed life into the Dreaming, and yet who also allowed
the fall of the destructive processes of invasion.

All these elements are amplified in my next example. Patrick Dodson
writes:

> As the land was ring-barked and cleared so we were stripped bare of
> all that was precious and priceless. Life itself was being chained
> down.
>
> The heart was slowly being pierced and living was being
> substituted with existence, shame and hopelessness. The land herself,
> our Mother, was being despoiled and defiled - she cried in sorrow and
> with despair for us, her children, the Aboriginal and Islander people.
> (Dodson 1988:5)

Dodson, one-time Catholic priest and Director of the Central Lands
Council and currently commissioner to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal
Deaths in Custody, is a creative political and theological thinker. His vision
embraces a region consisting of two ethnic groups - "Aboriginal and (Torres
Strait) Islander people" - the children of Mother Earth. The passage comes from
an article addressed to Aboriginal Catholics specifically and Christians
generally, asking them to recognise that the bicentenary celebrations are
"grounded in the original sin of the theft of our lands".

Dodson's widely published (the article appeared in *Land Rights News*)
and very catchy titles and phrases will do much to ensure Mother Earth becomes

a deity of which most literate Aborigines are aware. Equally prominent was the Aboriginal presentation at World Expo in Brisbane in 1988, and the accompanying publication entitled *The Rainbow Serpent* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) and her son Kabul Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Vivian Walker). Unlike her earlier work, this piece celebrates a solo Mother Earth.

> I see you come into sacred place of my
> tribe to get strength of the Earth
> Mother. That Earth Mother ...
> We are different you and me. We say the
> Earth is our mother - we cannot own
> her, she owns us. (Noonuccal and Noonuccal 1988:no pagination)

The story that follows is a pan-Aboriginal medley drawing on traditions from across the continent. The significant fact in all this is that the various localised elements are smoothly brought into a simple macro-myth bound together by the literally underlying Mother Earth.

A little over half-way through this glossy booklet, the machine age intervenes. The critique is gentle. Machines are not condemned, but they must not be allowed to dominate the spirit.

> ... I will
> always come back to this
> place to share **the feeling of
> the land** with all living
> things. I belong here where
> the spirit of the Earth
> Mother is strong in the land
> and in me.

At this point we are asked to allow the land spirit to touch us all so that the way of Mother Earth may once again thrive. There is no esoteric lore here, no myths to be revealed, but rather an appeal to the affections and softly allowing the earth itself to speak.

Since Australia's bicentennial year, when Dodson and Noonuccal made their immensely public statements, several prominent references to Mother Earth have been made. I choose two examples. The first is provided by the linguist Eve Mungwa Fesl. She has written what I believe to be the first statement by an Aborigine which tries to encapsulate the general tenor of Aboriginal religion.

Fesl's article makes the intriguing and perceptively candid statement that Aboriginal religion must be examined in relation to Aboriginal experiences of

non-Aborigines and the latter's views of the beliefs of the first Australians. The discussion which follows is a vitriolic critique of colonialists and missions, but "despite the concerted attempts to wipe out Koorie spirituality, it lived on. The form of expression has changed, but the strength of this spirituality is still strong in urban as well·as rural Koories." (1989:7) Acute observation and surely true.

The remainder concerns land, incontestably what has underpinned Aboriginal religion but in Fesl's case what has more specifically "underpinned the land rights movement". Her discussion is, I think it fair to say, both very general and very critical. Unlike whites, Aborigines, in their Eden-like existence, did not have wars or develop war technology. "In their frenzy to make money, they are destroying not only that which is sacred to us, but are killing the earth which nurtures all living things." (*ibid*:10) The strongest positive expression of faith found in the article is found in two poems where Mother Earth appears. The first, "Inheritance", is a positive celebration:

> Daughter of the Sea and Land am I
> - the Land my Mother, my soul.
> In my inheritance she give to me -
> Rights
> to care for her ...
> A right not buyable, nor sellable
> A total commitment forever.
> My inheritance to care for her
> The sea, the Land, My life, My Mother. (*ibid*:7)

The second, "The Dying Land", closes her article and is something of a eulogy. It begins:

> As the forest giants fall throughout the world
> And the air grows hotter
> Our Mother the Earth sighs in pain

And ends:

> In firing weapons to kill his sister, his brother
> The technocrat harms his Mother, the Nurturer.
> As he marvels at his skills, the Land lies dying. (*Ibid*:10)

What we witness here is precisely what Fesl says is also happening to non-Aboriginal traditions. "Many world religions have begun a re-think about

their own attitude to the planet and how their religious writings have been
interpreted in terms of caring for the planet." (*loc. cit.*)

My final instance is provided by Anne Pattel-Gray, Executive Secretary
of the Aboriginal and Islander Commission (Australian Council of Churches). It
is a statement made at an international conference on *Justice, Peace and the
Integrity of Creation* at Seoul, 1990. Pattel-Gray begins with a mytheme of a
great White spirit God who "created the world" and established Biblical-like
laws which sustained a paradise for 40,000 years. Then White people destroyed
the Aboriginal Eden. Enter Mother Earth.

> My people became more and more distressed at the sight of the White
> men raping, murdering and abusing their Mother Earth through
> mining. We knew the price they would pay for abusing Mother Earth.
> We knew there would soon be floods, drought, earthquakes and
> famine because Mother Earth had to retaliate in the only possible way
> that she knew how.

Again:

> We still fight against the destruction of our land and the abuse to our
> Mother Earth, and on a wider scale, we now believe the world is
> starting to see what their destruction has done to our Mother Earth...
> As believers in God, should we not be taking up our swords for
> justice, peace and the integrity of creation. (Pattel-Gray 1990:2)

God creates, Whites destroy, Mother Earth endures, Aborigines
understand. Take any one of the components of this quaternity away and the
integrity of the image is lost.

Conclusion

Speaking generally, Mother Earth perfectly suits the needs of
contemporary Aboriginal spiritual life, Unlike specific lands whose traditions
are open only to those who have had the privilege of an often esoteric traditional
education, Mother Earth is open to all of Aboriginal "Blood" who feel for land in
an Aboriginal way. She provides a new, radically transformed, spiritual
continuity for those denied their place. Says Dodson "the land is still here, the
spirit has not deserted us, we are faced with the task of helping non-Aboriginal
people to adopt the land as a mother". (1988:5)

It is equally worth noting that Mother Earth rests comfortably with the
widespread phenomenon of Aboriginal Christianity. Indeed, the structure of the

two beliefs at times merges insofar as the love of Mother Earth or the caring and sharing conceived of as now being the core of the old Law, virtually renders tradition (which, as we have seen, has become almost synonymous with the Dreaming) as the Eden of the Old Testament. As what is central to Aboriginality is the way of relating to land and to one another, but no longer to which lands one is related, there is no conflict with the notion of a single God whose sovereignty oversees the world.

It is thus that contemporary Aboriginal spiritual thought, while portraying a "tradition" with few syncretistic mythic details, has reshaped the very form of the old Law so that, like Judaeo-Christian thought, it is temporal, contains a paradise/fall breach, offers hope of salvation through rediscovering one's identity, and appeals to the powers of a single immanent Godhead, Mother Earth.

As Bob Randall says, the recent change to Aboriginal spirituality has been a total metamorphosis. And yet it would be ruthless and unwarranted to deny there was a continuity, no matter how distended, with the past. While the appeal to blood and the affections is indeed a new way of establishing a sense of place, we are left to ask whether Aboriginal people, determined to reclaim whatever they could of a heritage denied them, had any option but to appeal to these means of connection. The academic cannot but note the historical transformations. The contemporary Aborigine, on the other hand, is filled instead with a sense of pride and spiritual hope in having retained some hold of their past against incredible odds. There are few Aborigines who would not feel moved by the words of the song by the Aboriginal rock group Coloured Stone:

> This land of ours still holds the secret,
> That is sacred to our people,
> The birds call out; "Where are you now?"
> We're still here
> And we won't go away
> For a single day.

Note
·1   I here draw on some of the material in the closing sections of my earlier article on Mother Earth.

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From 'Medieval Grail' to 'Common Dish'?:

Catholic Theologies and Multiculturalism

Margaret O'Toole

If we were to seek a common denominator for majority Australia, it would (be) ... the ritual of the Common Dish, that vessel of common human sufferings, joys, disappointments, tragedies and bare sufficiencies from which most people have to eat in this world, and from which some choose to eat in order to keep faith with them. This dish is the opposite of the medieval Grail, which was the vessel attained only by the elite ... it lies close to the heart of Australian consciousness, and can never be safely ignored.[1] (Les A. Murray)

Preamble

I recall the first time I visited Vic Hayes at his home. His eyes sparkled as he greeted me. The reason for his delight was the publication of his edited book, *Theology in an Australian Context.*[2] I discovered then that the enterprise of doing theology in an Australian context was not only very dear to Vic Hayes' heart, but indicated his acute perception of the vital need for Christianity to break out of its classical, Western-European elitist "strait-jacket" and furnish a more apposite voice in our contemporary Australian multicultural society. This book, a "child of its time" (p.2), was part of the enormous ferment which has been an on-going feature of Australian Christianity for more than half of this century. For the Catholic Christians in this land it was the revolutionary nature of the vision of Vatican II in the 60's, the "beginning of a beginning" in Karl Rahner's view, which was the pivotal moment for change. The rich benefits of scholarship in biblical criticism, historical studies, contemporary philosophies and social sciences have continued to yield bumper harvests for Australian religious thinkers, professional theologians and Church pastors. The challenge for contemporary Australian Christianity inherent in the ferment is to resist gathering and storing this harvest in traditionally-shaped doctrinal silos; and

recognise the chance of creating, if not an entirely mutant strain of Christianity, at least a hybrid that holds promise of more brilliant and myriad colourings, of having increased adaptability to its environment, and of being essentially reliable both in preserving the robustness of its original "root" and in yeasting the "loaf" of humankind in this land.

I believe this has been part of Vic Hayes' vision and I am pleased to honour this visionary to whom this *Festshchrift* pays tribute.

Introduction

My contribution is to offer some reflections on the challenges that multiculturalism holds for Catholic theologies as the Roman Catholic tradition, after centuries of a self-definition that was intractably absolutist *vis-a-vis* other religions in the world, moves out of this dominantly exclusivist and religiously elitist mode of self-identity and engages in serious and authentic dialogue with the religions of the world. In addition, and as an intrinsic aspect of understanding this movement, I want to muse on what "spirit" is abroad among us during this time when the modernist vision of the Enlightenment, which was a singular force in establishing the "white" society in this land through invasion and settlement, is struggling to name itself in an "anti-modern", "post-modern" and "post" post-modern world (Tracy 1990).

I use the term "muse" intentionally. Among the meanings of the word in the Chambers English Dictionary (1988), is the notion of "absent-mindedness" and being "fuddled". I hope this is neither where my Muse has led me nor a description of Catholic theologies in Australia. Rather I would like to hold to the original French, "*musé*", which carries the meaning of a "dog that has lost its scent" and has to "sniff the air" to find its direction. Contemporary theology in Australia needs to "sniff the air" ...

Catholic "theologies" in the title is also deliberate. The notion that there is a single monumental universally-accepted Catholic theology is an illusion. It always has been an illusion as the history of Catholicism from its origin attests. What has been accepted as monolithic theology claiming universality, has in fact been Eurocentric and conditioned by Western culture. History also reveals that Christianity's original charter of proclaiming and witnessing to an eschatologically grounded vision of freedom and liberation from any form of social oppression and discrimination, became caught in imperialistic, patriarchal forms of ecclesiastical structures. The universality of Christianity then developed as an abstract notion, completely at odds with the socially-grounded

context of its original vision. Our times are increasingly aware of how this imperialistic ecclesiastical *modus operandi* locked the Catholic Church into patriarchal, racial, classist and religiously exclusivist structures, the continuance of which threaten to drain the vitality of its liberating vision.

The inextricably tangled issues of sexism, racism and classism locked into the reality of multiculturalism will not be dealt with in any detail here. But they are understood to be an intrinsic part of the Australian Catholic theological agenda since these culturally defined socio-economic-political issues are the locus of the emerging "theologies of the periphery" that are challenging the very foundations of traditional Western European theologies of the "centre". The global reality of this is clearly evident in Dussel's analysis:

> The growing awareness of the tragic reality of the Third World has caused an irruption of the exploited classes and humiliated races. ... The Third World is beginning to speak with its own voice, demanding justice and equality ... It is the rising of religious and ethnic groups seeking to affirm their own identity, of women demanding recognition, of the young protesting against the system of dominant values. (Dussel 1984)

Perhaps the Australian temptation to always look to see what is happening "over there" hinders our theological awareness that our own society and Church is a microcosm of "over there". To be sure these issues have their own Australian "flavour" (Kelly 1991) and are increasingly the focus for Catholic theologies. However, they are as yet in embryonic form. A serious and committed engagement of these socio-cultural issues remains a critical part of the theological agenda of this land.

From 'Medieval Grail' to 'Common Dish'?

It is wise to listen to our poets. They come from the "desert country",[3] prophet-like, to shatter our illusions and call us to plumb the depths of our individual and collective consciousness. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, the poet Les Murray employs the images of the "medieval Grail" and the "Common Dish". I want to use his focus on the elitism of the medieval Grail as a metaphor for exploring the demise of Roman Catholicism as the "centre" among the religions of the world, and to explore the resources of his second metaphor, the "Common Dish", to discover what it offers to reflection on the theological task in our contemporary multicultural society. In doing so I shift the imagery from "ritual" to "substance", being aware, however, that the life

source of ritual is the substance of the root metaphor from which the ritual derives its meaning.

When the image of the Common Dish is applied to the Australian consciousness (which, of course, is formed by and forms the cultural and sub-cultural worlds in which we live), it suggests the idea of the "many", the "communal" dimension of our society. To what extent it captures the complexity of the issues embedded in multiculturalism in contemporary Australian society (and theology's task in relation to that) is not immediately evident. Suffering and tragedy are part of the "common denominator" in the evolution of Australian consciousness despite our cultural amnesia with regard to our history of 200 years of "white" occupation in this land, our penchant for closing our eyes to the suffering and misery that is on our own doorstep, and our unflagging efforts to create and live in a culture of comfort. The European invasion is the source of "human suffering" and "tragedies" for Aboriginal Australians. The unrelenting suffering of the first Europeans here, victims of a brutalising system, remains as the genesis of "white" history in this land. The subsequent struggle and incredible hardships of the first settlers in this harsh and alien environment belong to the "memoria" that our contemporary society needs in order to give direction and meaning at this time in its history. The motive force behind the "migrant presence" here is flight from sufferings caused by economic and political oppression and a struggle for the "bare sufficiencies" of life. The Catholic vision, which is shared by all Christian traditions, is founded on the transformation of suffering and tragedy in the mystery that is resurrection. Is the Catholic Christian hope-filled conviction of the power and presence of this transformation at the heart of Australian **Catholic** consciousness? The vessel of the Grail contained that particular brew which guaranteed the healing and the transformation of the "wasteland". As an image of an elitist and exclusivist Catholicism, its contents have been spilled out on this "alien" soil and its potency is now largely dissipated. If the power of the redemptive mystery has passed to the Common Dish, the great question for Catholic theology is: what is the essence of the brew within it? From whence has it been distilled? And does it hold the transformative and life-giving powers that another age attempted to capture through its image of the Grail.

The Catholic Church and Multiculturalism

The "Grail elitism" of the Catholic Church stems from the fact that, in its journey through history, the Church has confused the universality of what it

identified as its mission to all "nations" (Mt. 28: 19), with the universality of the Reign of God. The basic premise of its universal stance is the unity of faith. But there is a distinction between unity and uniformity. The fear was, and continues to be, that either there is uniformity in theology and ecclesiastical directives, or there will be a fragmentation of faith. Yet the principles of adaptation and translation, change and pluralism are at the heart of Christianity's own self-definition. Faced with an identity crisis at its origins, Christianity took a pivotal decision towards self-identity. The earliest disciples/apostles, not without deep anguish, fear and anger, took a firm position as to the translatability of the Gospel message. They acted to cross cultural boundaries and "relativise" the religion's roots in Judaism, "destigmatise" the Hellenistic culture into which the disciples were forced or chose to move, and appropriated this gentile culture as the "natural extension" of its own religious life. Their decision was finally motivated by a firm religious belief in and commitment to "the pluralist merit of culture within God's universal purpose" (Sanneh 1990). At base, it was essentially a theologically informed decision. It formed and continues to form a significant reason (though not the only one) for the missionary imperative in Christianity.[4]

The life of the Catholic Church in Australia has from its beginnings followed an assimilationist pattern. Even though the dominantly Anglo-Celtic[5] nature of its origns has long since been displaced by multi-European and, in recent years, by increasing numbers of migrants from Asian, Spanish and Latin American Catholic traditions, the movement away from this assimilationist pattern has been tentative and sporadic. Analyses of the Church's role in the communal and religious life of migrants since post-war immigration times are very limited (Pittarello 1986). There have been positive pastoral achievements but these have generally been directed by a welfare ministry, based for the most part on the hegemonic theological views of the culturally dominant model of ("the original") Catholicism in this country. The thrust has been in doing things "for" migrants rather than acknowledging their equality in being the Church of Australia. This has reflected an essentially "integrationist" view in its ideology (Rafter and Murphy 1982). Ignoring or minimising the crucial issues surrounding the intertwining of religion, culture, ethnicity and power-politics has tended to create a form of "institutionally determined cultural apartheid" in Catholicism (Lewins 1982). Successful though those "integrationist" initiatives have been, they have not made up "for the deficiencies resulting from a system developed to cater for a substantially monocultural society which continues to be

so in its principles and structures" (Pittarello *op.cit.*). The "national" has, in the main (though this is slowly changing) won out over "catholic" and the *koinonia* of the 'Common Dish' is still in the making.

Evident in all this is the fact that the Church has followed the national pattern of movement from "assimilationist" to "integrationist" but has not proceeded to accept a "multicultural" Catholicism. Despite the "universalism" of Catholic doctrine and the obligation of its ecclesial laws the lived reality in Australia affirms the truth of Lewins' remark, "culture divides more that religion unites" (Lewins 1978). The socio-cultural "otherness" of migrants rather than historical doctrinal differences (as in the Orthodox and Roman Churches) or differences in liturgical rites and practices divide the Catholic communities more than their foundational Christological beliefs unite them. The hegemony of traditional Anglo-Celtic forms of leadership has maintained in large measure "epistemological and cultural bondage" to the colonial mentality that has co-opted Catholicism so often in its history (Carrington 1986:13). Theologically this was justified and defended by Catholicism's exclusivist self-identity. In sociological terms it was a failure to recognise fully the historical and socio-cultural influences on religious beliefs and practices, and the fact that Christian faith is "culturally received not directly infused by the grace of God" (Pittarello *op.cit.*). The resilience of the "colonial" bonding is evident when one realises that a metamorphosis had begun with Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century of the Church's view of the important role culture plays in the proclamation of the Gospel, a metamorphosis which has continued through the impetus of Vatican II to this present time (Carrier 1985:13ff). In January 1983, Pope John Paul II created the Pontifical Council for Culture, whose aim is to carry forward communication, critique, and understanding among the Church and the many cultual creations of humankind.

The nexus between theology and the Church in this task is obvious. But unlike its European matrix,[6] there has tended to be a certain looseness in the Australian Catholic theologians' link with Rome, distance being somewhat fortuituous rather than tyrannic.

From the Absolute Elitism of the 'Grail' ...

Very often in its history the Catholic Church has identified and has been identified with the "bourgeois mind" described by Simone de Beauvoir (1953). It has drawn on a theology interpreted always from a patriarchal viewpoint, to support its own absolutist ideas as to the "nature" of the "other" and the

"function" of the "other" within a dominantly patriarchal and clerical world. Women, coloured people, the poor and illiterate, the non-ordained, members of other religions, the environment itself have been relegated to the position of "Other" within the categories of domination and subjugation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984). The proliferation of theologies of the *sensus fidelium*, of liberation, enculturation, and the variety of environmental theologies give evidence of the ground-swell of resistance across the globe against an absolutist and exclusive model of Catholicism.

Under pressure from such immense cultural forces, which were recognised by the Vatican Council as "the signs of the times", the cultural monocentricism of the Catholic world has been brought (albeit kicking and screaming on the part of conservative die-hards) into a religious world that is culturally polycentric and therefore consciously plural (Metz 1985). Adaptation has by no means been easy, and the dangers of ethnocentrism are not dispelled by a Council's decree. De-centering is an agonising process for it so often betokens blood-letting among those who would struggle for the power and privilege which appears always to demarcate being "at the centre". While there are genuine (or token) efforts towards de-centering, the uniqueness of its universal mission is in the Catholic bone-marrow. This remains the strength of its 'catholicity'. De-centering does not mean the abandonment of its own religious particularity and what this offers to the human endeavour in every age. Acceptance of religious pluralism 'at any price' does not serve the Catholic religious vision nor does it honour the particularity of other religious traditions. The challenge is in letting go the notion that any one single and universal basic formula of the Catholic faith is applicable for every culture in every period of history and in every human experience.

The movement into a theologically pluralist world is taken for granted among most theologians. Pluralism has a concrete reality within Catholicism itself. For Catholic theologies, the return to hermeneutics has been, and continues to be the major contemporary philosophical basis for assessing its religious truth-claims. Hermeneutics is that process whereby the two "constants" of the contemporary human experience and the Christian tradition "are not available immediately but are understood only by being interpreted" (Tracy 1988). The bottom line of unity in Catholic theologies is not a unity of a particular **process of interpretation**, but the unity of a common **need to interpret**.

In relation to other Christian denominations, the dialectic of ecumenism has moved to a point of unity in diversity which would have been incomprehensible to a Reformation Church and to the Roman Church in successive centuries until our own. In exploring the experience of the divine in other cultures and religious traditions, the general thrust of Catholic theologies is to critically examine and put to the test the culturally-controlled, epistemological and historical bases on which they continue to ground their claim to religious truth.

While this may be happening in the theological world the impact on the "real" world of social realtionships, culture, politics and the economy is the measure of theology's *raison d'etre*. The challenge for Catholic theologies is to be wary of being seduced into the realm of theoretical issues about beliefs and truths within its own household and with its relationship to other religious traditions, and lose hold of the very practical goal of its own endeavour.

In moving from the elite exclusivism of Catholicism imaged in this paper by the metaphor of the "Grail", it is now necessary to "sniff the air" to discover if the pluralism of the Australian multi-faith society can be accomodated by the image of a 'Common Dish'. The religious and theological pluralism of the 'Common Dish' demands a careful examination of the substance of Catholicism when its exclusivist "ingredient" is dimished, modified or removed. Two vital elements (among very many) can be identified as contributing to this "substance". The first centres on the possibility in Australia of an "national ethic of humankind". The second is to retrieve from the Christian tradition its original experience and conviction that the Spirit of God is the Source of the transformation of society: the *Hermeneusis* at the heart of a all that is life-giving for the *humanum*.

Towards a Theology of the 'Common Dish'

The existence of many faiths is a given of any multicultural society. Religion plays a central role in the life of most of the different ethnic groups now living in Australia. The long-term effect of this centrality of religion as part of human living in this very 'secular' society, is not at all clear. That which divides cultural groups in this land are far more to the forefront than that which might unite them. Religions are not exempt from strife. Almost every religious tradition now represented in Australia has a history of some dimension of fanaticism to political, racial, cultural or ethnic antagonisms. An everpresent 'anxiety' throughout the history of this nation is the possibility that ethnic groups

bring with them these antagonisms which could threaten the stability and order of the society. The question of whether this land can be a 'common' neutral ground is not always very clear. For Catholic theologies, the question of whether these many 'religious' interpretations of life will win out over a 'secular' view of human living in this country, is a critical issue.

Given the massive situations of social injustice in our society and world and the trend towards a praxis-oriented theological approach, a question for Catholic theologies in this land is the extent to which, in this multicultural society, a subtle Western "colonisation of spirit" is going on. Are dominant Western ideologies still operating at some subterranean level in this Australian society? If so, is this a question for theology? Three "cultural channels" in Australian society offer some "substance" to this question; those which come from the ethnic groups, from the descendents of the original settlers and from Aboriginal Australians.

The hope of a new life of political freedom, prosperity and improved opportunity for their children was what initially drew most migrants to this "lucky country". With this immigration phenomenon came the tensions between maintaining a particular cultural identity and the formation of a harmonious and cohesive society. This remains a foundational issue for any poly-cultural society. The complex questions surrounding this tension are real and have an immediacy in the Australian context which theology must deal with, for as yet, these tensions are far from resolution. Yet for Catholic theologies a wider vision may be needed for addressing the question of multi-faith in this society. While migrants continue to maintain their specific ethnic identity through adherence to their own language, customs, music, choice of food, as well as religious worship, the question of how much these diverse cultures have themselves been razed to become part of the dominant technological culture, (the origins and the continued hegemony of which are Western), poses serious questions for Catholic theologies. The question is put by Johannes Baptist Metz in reference to the global reality of the market forces governing the political and economic destinies of so many nations, particularly the developing nations of the world.[7] He writes:

> More and more the question imposes itself whether the macrocultural variety in our world is invisibly disappearing, whether this variety - slowly but surely - is being broken down and levelled by that secular Westernising of the whole world. (Metz 1991:2)

Such a warning alerts Catholic theologies in Australia to the subversive role of a secular westernising of the world which is a consequence of the technological culture. In Bishop Bruce Wilson's view (obviously directed towards the non-Aboriginal Australians) the cohesiviness of Australian society is now based on "economic prosperity". His fear is that "there is developing a kind of common denominator secularism" which is like a "hidden religion" emanating from the particular values that are promoted by political decisions, an ethos of individualism and the lures of consumerism. (Interview with Wilson in Harris 1989:5) Inevitably, there are winners and losers in such a society, and for any Christian tradition, the lived situation of the most marginalised in that society must be the basic measure of its concern and the point of departure for its theology. If this "secular westernising" so characteristic of a culture of technology is a "common denominator" in the 'Common Dish' of the Australian multicultural society, and if it threatens the rights of any group of people in this society, then it is a critical issue for Catholic theologies.

The more recent migrants to this land, particularly those who have arrived here from Asia, may not be economically "prosperous", and the discriminatory and racially-biased social practices to which they are subjected have to belong to the theological endeavour here. But many other cultural groups, while having maintained their ethnic identity, are now into their second and third generation born in this land. Specific ethnic identity does not necessarily rule out the desire for upward mobility nor the reality of being locked into the values of "economic prosperity". Some of the very wealthy people in Australia belong to post-war ethnic groups. In attempting to dialogue across the barriers of religious traditions, it may be that doctrinal agreement may well seem an easier option than an ethical commitment to combatting the injustices that are an inevitable part of the Western drive towards "economic prosperity".

Values presuppose ethics. One of the functions of any religion has been to provide its members with different structures and concepts of law to be observed, which are based on belief in its original revelation or concept and which are set up to protect the values held to be intrinsic to that original revelation or concept. At this time, however, the question of whether the overt acceptance of a religious perspective in the lives of all religions is sufficiently ethically grounded and oriented towards establishing justice and equality in the society, is a very real question for Catholic theologies in Australia. However, these theologies cannot claim to be solving the social problems of injustices if the Catholic Church is also helping to create or prolong them. So the need for

self-criticism is always present in examining the possibility of a universal ethic of humankind.

But dealing with secularism in Australia is not just a question of dialogue between different religious and ethical views. If secularism is a "common denominator" in the Australian "white" consciousness, then its roots go further back than the post-war migration years.

The historical origins of secularism come out of Enlightenment thinking characteristic of late eighteenth century England. In the development of its "white" cultural history, Australian settlers have created what Allan Patience (1991) calls a "hard" culture, the most secular culture in the world. Patience identifies its four cultural corner-stones as:

i)   a culture that remains impervious to any "spiritual sensibilities", is closed to any sense of the transcendence, does not "resonate with religious voices";

ii)   a culture that is "populist", meaning that form of banality or "laid-backnessness" that is deeply suspicious of "high cultural traditions" and reacts strongly against the "complexities of life";

iii)   a deeply racist attitude stemming from a "white" prejudice against the original inhabitants of this land, and surfacing again in a cultural exclusivism embodied in the "White Australian policy" and in the kind of irrational xenophobic behaviour that interned Australians of German descent during two World Wars and was particularly offensive to Australian Arabs during the Gulf War;

iv)   an aggressive, competitive, masculinist culture where the myth of mateship is drained of any authentic egalitarianism by its unyielding bias in favour of Anglo-Celtic males.

In the midst of this "banal" culture where life appears to hold no deep bonding nor responding creatively and compassionately to the enormously critical issues of our times, the question has to be asked: is this secularism redeemable? Is there any sense of the "transcendent" in whatever manifestation this might take? Obviously there is. Increasing awareness of co-responsibility for the direction that our nation and world is taking is evident among members of various religious traditions as well as in society at large. It is not possible to

develop it here, but our poets and artists are often the "prophets" who can discern, at times more acutely than our "priests", the mysterious individual and collective selves that seem to prefer to remain disguised behind an external banality.[8] The pervasive secularism of our society may well be challenged by the "God in hiding" that is "down under" in the Australian spirit. Perhaps the traditional structures of Church have been the wrong places to look. Theology needs to continue to "sniff the air".

Christianity's original ethical vision is encapsulated in the words of the Beatitudes. In its commitment to this vision during its two thousand years of existence, as well as its two hundred years of presence in this country, there are examples of courageous success stories as well as chronicles of scandalous failure. The question of the injustices perpetrated on Aboriginal Australians in the past and the multiforms of those injustices today continue to hold out a major challenge to Catholic theologies. The association of these with the "westernising of cultures" through the technology of culture and the subsequent secularisation of cultures, is readily seen. While it has its specific Australian problems, what is happening on the global scene in Catholicism has much to offer to developing Catholic theologies for this land.

The increasingly common phrase that the Catholic Church no longer **has** a Third World Church, but **is** a Third World Church is of fundamental importance for Catholic theologies in Australia. It means that, regardless of the very important issues of "localised" pluralism in theological positions, forms of liturgical worship or customary practices, differences which have their origins in the dominantly Western form of Catholicism, the irruption of the poor, oppressed and marginalised into history now call into question the very meaning and truth of human history and human existence. The historical events of massive suffering and forms of continued oppression including the structural and systemic nature of the oppression of these people who have been stripped of their history and their cultural identity, and have always been regarded as "other", demand of Catholicism a radical reorganising of the philosophical foundations on which it has formulated its theological categories. This "paradigm shift" requires that theology has its source in the very concrete historical, social and political experiences of people in doing theology rather than in theoretical concepts of authenticity and meaning. This is essentially a theology based on issues of justice and freedom; it seeks to hold together spirituality and politics; it is dynamic rather than static in its orientation; it has as its main reason for existence, not various forms of speculation but specific action

in solidarity with the victims of suffering and critical reflection on this action in the light of the Christian praxis as its basic methodology. Its basic question is not "Who is God and what is the nature of God's salvation in Jesus Christ?" Rather it asks, "Where is God acting now that human history is marked more by suffering than by caretaking? How is human suffering and hope of liberation identified in Jesus the Christ?" (Chopp 1986)

Again, the temptation is to think it is all happening "over there". But the history of injustices and suffering experienced by Aboriginal Australian people, the first people to be classed as "other" and subjugated by the dominant colonisers of this land, constitutes a situation that, as in other nations, calls into question the accepted meaning of human existence in this land. The Catholic Church has to atone for its complicity in this subjugation, and its theologies must now be from the perspective of those relegated by a dominant culture to the "under-side" of human living in this land. Third World conditions exist here however "hidden" these may be to the public eye.

There is a growing global ecumenical consciousness not only between Christian denominations but also between religions. Despite the differences in religious beliefs, laws and practices, even as these are lived out in the social spheres, members of different religious traditions drawing on the values inherent in their respective religious tradition, **can** live in a society and work together to build and maintain cohesion within that society. This presumes some form of consensus that the values which are ethically grounded in each religious tradition, have enduring validity and worth. Religions hold within them one of the most fertile of possibilities for working towards a national (and global) ethic of the humankind, where the *humanum* becomes a criterion of truth as well as "doctrines". Much of this depends on "peace between religions". In the 1989 colloquium held in Paris, Hans Kung delivered a paper entitled, "No world peace without religious peace: An ecumenical path between being fanatical for the truth and forgetting the truth." He argues that "only a religion that promotes true humanity could be a true and good religion", and conversely, "true religion, in so far as it is directed towards the human rights of human beings, is the fulfilment of true *humanitas*". (Kung 1990)

A Theology of *Co-Spiritus* for the 'Common Dish'?

One of the theological consequences of the shift from the exclusivism of the "Grail" to the inclusivism of the "Common Dish" in the Catholic world is the movement from a dominant theology of the Word to a theology of the World.

Catholic theologies hold fast to the belief that the mystery of God's salvation in the world is centred on Jesus the Christ as the revelatory *Logos* of God. Though this remains valid, the acceptance of religious pluralism and the search for a way towards a positive and inclusive ecumenical dialogue with the religions of the world, have generated a welter of "new" Christologies. The *Logos* model of dogmatic elitist Christology is less than adequate to address the pressing issues of our time. It is not really a process of inventing the "new" in the contemporary sense of replacing the "useless". "Novelty" is at the heart of the Christian Mystery as the continual "Surprise" and discovery of the incalculable depths of that divine Mystery.

One of the most ancient Christologies, seen emerging in the writings of Paul and in the texts of the Gospels, is a Spirit-Christology. The risen Christ, and on reflection, Jesus of Nazareth, is the **exclusive locus** of the Spirit. The Christian community, by virtue of its unique relationship with the risen Christ, is the locus of the Spirit's activity in the world. The theological promise and development of this Christology was aborted and eventually fell into oblivion, subverted by Ebionite adoptionists and in later centuries by the subordinationists whose condemnation by the Church was final. Nicolas Berdyaev's penetrating remark that the Spirit is the "last unexplored theological frontier" (1946:22) captures the subsequent invisibility of a well-developed theology of the Spirit in Catholic theological history. Our own times have seen the reversal of this. A hermeneutic of retrieval of a Spirit-Christology and a more rich theology of Spirit is not confined to Catholic theologies. It is emerging as the "indispensable complement" of, and creative force in impelling constructive ecumenical dialogue.[9] Contrasting with a "functional" Pneumatology with its emphasis largely on private and personal interior piety, sacramental "infusion" of grace and magisterial guidance, a more "phenomenological" approach characterises contemporary theologies of Spirit. Seeing what the Spirit does in the lives of people and in the human community at large is the point of departure for speaking about the Spirit.

Despite the inheritance of Hellenistic dualism in its understanding of the nature of reality, and its subsequent under-developed theology of the Spirit in relation to its theism and Christologies, Catholic theology always held to the irreplaceable "role" of the Spirit in the process of salvation. The Spirit is the "sole possibility of any relationship with God", the "universal point of contact between God and history" (McDonnell 1982:144,145). Our times now need a theology of Spirit that can move beyond those soteriological categories that have locked the

experienced reality of salvation into a theology of the "fallenness" of creation and a dualism of matter and spirit. The eschatological dynamism of *ruah* YHWH has cosmic force as the Creator-God embracing the whole of human history, and the whole of creation bringing it to fulfillment in its final redemptive destiny, the *shalom* of the Reign of God.

Preserving the uniqueness of Jesus in his relationship with the Spirit is the crucial issue for those who would explore the "ambiguity and promise" of a Spirit-Christology (Rosato 1977). The ontological referent of Logos-Christology is "from above" using a Greek metaphysical formula for describing the pre-existing *Logos* of God becoming "flesh". A Christology "from below" has as its ontological referent the historico-cultural existential realities of the *humanum* in which the cries, yearnings, joys, hopes, despairs, struggles and triumphs of the human spirit, the human enfleshed *pneuma*, have been seen and heard. Kasper argues that Jesus is "the Son of God" because "from the beginning he is from the Spirit ... the bearer of the Spirit ... created by the Spirit, and ... himself life-giving Spirit" (McDonnell *op.cit.*:156, referring to Kasper). The Spirit is constitutive of the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth ontologically, and in the resurrection (Rom. 1:4) guarantees the "unique ontological character of Jesus" as the exalted Christ, the unique *Logos* of God in the life of the Trinity (McDonnell *op.cit.*:157). It is this risen Jesus who commissions the proclamation of the Gospel's vision of liberation and freedom (Lk. 24: 44-49, Acts 1: 8). This will be possible because of the empowerment by the Spirit, given as "the Spirit in our hearts" (2 Cor. 1:22), the *arrabôn* of its final triumph and fulfillment.

The human *pneuma* is the place of the depths, of elemental religious sensibilities and openness to the transcendent. It is more akin to the Hebrew Scriptures' notion of "heart" (*leb, lebab*) than the Greek notion of spirit. The *pneuma* of humanity is the "where" (consciousness and unconsciousness) in the human person which is always the objective of religious conversion and devotion. It is the prolegomenon of any pledge of religious commitment. The possibility of exploring *pneuma* as an ontological referent for Christology and as a way into having a pneumatological framework for speaking of the saving activity of God experienced existentially in the midst of the historical events of our times, could have much to offer the pluralism of religious beliefs and practices. It is not a form of an "esoteric core" at the level of which all religions are basically the same. (Schuon 1984) Of its essence it is plural. Difference is not only the mode of *pneuma's* existence; it is the very quintessence of its

creative power. Encounter, relationship, collaboration and compassion are the manifestations of its life-giving force.

Such an exploration of *pneuma* has the potential (the enormous complexities of the task notwithstanding) of working with the notion of a universal ethic of humanity. In the theoretical realm it can offer its own insights into such a study as that of John Hick in finding a philosophical basis for developing a "field theory from a religious point of view" (Hick 1989:xiii); or into the insights of Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine (1991:18) and their notion of a *darsana*, a world-view or vision of reality "which can be shared by humans of various great civilisations and cultures of the globe".

This ontological referent of *pneuma* in humanity is not a form of a neo-Hegalian *Geist* working itself out dialectically in the course of human history, but the manifestation of the struggle and yearnings of humankind with their triumphs and failures. The divine *Pneuma* is the experience of action, freedom, creative relationships, community and life. This divine *Holy Breath* lies at the heart of the cries of the poor in this land across the globe, the strength of those who have no strength. This divine *Pneuma* does not take the place of history, but enters into history through the women, men and children who are enfleshed *pneuma* and who carry the divine *Pneuma* within themselves. It is the heart-beat of humanity.

A Gospel-directed world-view is one of "seeing" and "hearing" what is happening in the lived realities of peoples' lives. In the midst of the first powerful Pentecostal experience, Peter pointed to what were the manifestations of the Spirit's radical prophetic action of challenging and upturning the religious *status quo*. In describing the outpourings of the promised Spirit he said, "... having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which **you see and hear**". (Acts 2: 33). Emphasis mine)

What do we see and hear in our times? Stasis is the very antithesis of *pneuma*. The dynamism of human and divine *pneuma* is expressed in action. It is no coincidence that this is an age of "movements", the human *pneuma* across the globe has found its voice. Despite the incredibly powerful forces at work in the contemporary world that seek to subvert and control it, the manifestation of the human and divine Spirit is the "*telos* deeply rooted in our human project" (Bernstein 1983:231) that strives to attain what is of life-giving power for all humanity, and for the planet itself (Rom. 8: 19-27). For all its almost infinite variety in ways and means, there is a common searching for healing and wholeness, a yearning and hope-filled questing. There is a gathering together of

the very rich inheritance of the spiritual wisdom of world religions as well as the insights into the the discovery and developmental dynamics of the core at the "deepest center of the person". The upsurge of spirit-uality in our times, evidenced within every religious tradition (Schneiders 1989) and within the deep spirituality at the source of the commitment in praxis-oriented liberation theologies, and which is now becoming the life-force of a new ecological vision for humanity, all of this has the sense of both a shining ephiphany and a storm wind blowing across the face of the earth.

Most importantly, in the Australian context, it can draw on a more primal source for nourishment. In this ancient land of the Holy Spirit, Aboriginal Australians' deeply held religious belief in the "shining white Spirit" that emanates from the soil of this most ancient of continents, must constitute the prolegomenon to any theological process in this country. The past elitist exclusivism of Catholic Church practice in plundering the Australian Aboriginal religion and therefore its culture, has not yet been atoned for. Genuine development in Catholic theologies in Australia are dependent on this reconciliation for only then can they move from the dominance of "Grail" elitism to solidarity with equals in the "Common Dish".

Conclusion

Perhaps Ezekiel holds out the most promise for what God is creating in the "heart of the Australian consciousness ..." in the union of divine and human *pneuma*:

> I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes. (Ezek. 36: 26-27)

Notes

1   Taken from "Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia" in *The Shape of Belief: Christianity in Australia Today*, edited by D. Harris, D. Hynd and D. Millikan, eds (1982), Homebush, Australia: Lancer Books, p.25.

2   First published May 1979. The book consists of a collection of papers presented during both the ANZSTS/ANZATS Joint Annual Conference and the AASR National Conference held at La Trobe University, Melbourne in August 1979. Vic Hayes was the editor.

3   "I'm from the desert country ..." is part of the opening line of Francis
      Webb's poem, "Poet". See *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*
      (1986), selected by Les Murray, Melbourne: Collins Dove, p.179.

4   The missionary endeavour of Catholicism has overtones of colonial
      imperialism and cultural domination. The complexity of the issues
      surrounding Catholic "foreign missions activity" cannot be dealt with in
      this article. But that there are changes is without question. For a detailed
      analysis of applying anthropology to "mission" see Luzbetak (1989).

5   Edmund Campion argues that at least the Irish dominance in the early
      years of the Catholic Church in Australia was not as pervasive as is
      generally held, and that other nationalities were well represented. See,
      "Immigration and the Catholic Church", paper presented at the National
      Convention of the Scalabrini Fathers, Mosman, NSW, August, 1987.

6   The intrusion of conservative forces in the Vatican into the freedom of
      theological research and teaching among theologians in Europe, Latin
      America, and USA is a cause of real concern in the theological world.
      "The Cologne Declaration" (see "Against Incapacitation - For an Open
      Catholicism" in *The Tablet*, February 4, 1989), is a contemporary
      example of the deep Catholic intuition concerning the perennial need for
      criticism and dissent within the Church. See Faus, J.I.G. (1985), *Where
      the Spirit Breathes: Prophetic Dissent in the Church*, Maryknoll, N.Y.:
      Orbis Books.

7   See also Interview with Susan George, "Who Gives the Orders in the New
      World Order?" in "Whatever Happened to the New World Order?"
      Special supplementary issue of *24 Hours*, February 1992.

8   In particular Tony Kelly has explored the rich resources of Australian
      religious poetry to discern the sense of the transcendent that is particular
      to the consciousness of Australians and has its genesis in the early years
      of settlement. See Kelly, T. (1989), "Australian Identity and Spirituality",
      a series of papers delivered during the Bi-annual Conference of the
      Australian Association for Religious Education, Sydney. See also
      Crumlin, R. (1988), *Images of Religion in Australian Art*, Kensington,
      NSW: Bay Books.

9   The literature on the Spirit is extensive and growing all the time. Accompanying it is a burgeoning literature devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity. As examples, see Congar, Y. (1983), *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vols, 1-3, New York: Seabury Press; Kasper, W. (1976), *Jesus the Christ*, London: Burns & Oates; Tillich, P. (1968), *Systematic Theology*, Vols 2 and 3, Digswell Place, Hartfordshire: James Nisbet. The works of Heribut Muhlen are less accessible in English: see, Sears, R. T. (1974), "Spirit: Divine and Human. The Theology of the Holy Spirit in Heribut Muhlen and its Relevance for Evaluating the Data of Psychotherapy", Doctoral Thesis, Fordham University. For Trinity, see Rahner, K. (1970), *The Trinity*, London: Burns and Oates; Moltmann, J. (1981), *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, London: SCM Press; O'Donnell, J.J. (1988), *The Mystery of the Triune God*, London: Sheed and Ward; McFague, S. (1987), *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*, London: SCM Press.

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Religion, Culture and Difference: The 'Uneasiness' of Patrick White

Penelope Magee

... Language in its widest sense is the hawk suspended above eternity, feeding from it, but not of its substance, and not necessarily for its life, and thus never able to be translated into it; only able by a wing movement, so to speak, a cry, a shadow, to hint at what lies beneath it, on the untouched, undescribed, almost unknown plain. (Janet Frame, Living in the Maniototo)

It is generally accepted that Patrick White in his written works posed questions thought either too puzzling or too difficult, or in some way irrelevant to the perceived needs of the Australia in which he lived, so passionately attached yet so uncomfortably. The barrier of his self-named 'foreignness' is seen as the product of any number of factors associated with his upbringing, sexuality, writing style and subject matter. In this essay I wish to examine in a limited way some aspects of White's 'unease' associated with religion and culture in Australia and argue that his dilemma in being 'Australian' and 'religious' is not an outsider's problem, but is precisely our own as contemporary Australians, experienced and explored by him at a time when we saw no problem at all. It is my guess that as time passes, Patrick White will be understood as the great 'insider' of our culture (the one who knew us best of all?) and that this will be symptomatic of a transformation in our understanding of 'culture', 'multiculture' and 'religion'.

With the exception of Dorothy Green (1984) and Peter Beatson (1976) I will not be referring to the mass of literary criticism which White both inspired and (unjustifiably in some cases) despised. I wish first to explore some aspects of White's thinking, writing and life history concerning culture and cultures, religion and religions, then use the post-colonial critical writing of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a sounding board for understanding the closely connected patterns of White's participation in Australian culture and what he calls 'the graph of my religious faith'[1]. These two writers may at first seem to have no connection. It is my conviction that Spivak's insights throw light on the difficult

contradictions involved in White's passionate critique of Australian society, 'Australianness' and religion.

* * *

White's relation to Australia was always one of dissonance. He was never one of those 'warm' Australians 'the majority of whom are not the golden-hearted beings they would like to think' (FG:33). He knows he is not 'golden', but 'black', having experienced 'bitter days' in England and Europe at war, the kind who could laugh 'black laughter for a bleak but hilarious world which we understood in our bowels, as warm, deluded Australia could not' (FG:34). Elsewhere he complains of the 'surge of the colonial sheep race' (FG:253) against which artists in Australia must struggle, Australia being a 'philistine non-culture of money, wheels, and swimming pools ...' (FG:227).

The golden-hearted Australian can only too quickly become one of the mob who rejects the weak, defenceless, the foreign, the minorities ...

> Some of us become vegans to atone for the soft cruelties we've inflicted on our fellow animals: parents, children, lovers, friends, though our eyes continue to conceal knives ready for strangers we pass in the street if they don't recognise our right of way. (White 1987:12)

White's post-war return to Australia reflects his ambivalence: in London he was hungry and felt he would be swamped by the bitter greyness of it all, 'the feeling that death still hovered over the city I had known' (FG:126). But only the Australian landscapes, not the people, beckoned him to return. When at last he wandered the streets of Freemantle, a painful love overwhelms him. His reactions become the emotions of Eadie/Eddie in *The Twyborn Affair*:

> Dream streets: the tiny houses in maroon or shit-coloured brick. Paint-blisters on brown woodwork. Festoons of iron doilies which suggest melting caramel. Blank, suetty faces ...
>   Oh God, but I feel for them, **because I know exactly** - they are what I am, and I am they interchangeable. (White cited in Marr 1991:142)[2]

But he was also the foreign newcomer, both abroad and at home. In Palestine during the war he was a 'stranger surrounded by exiles' (Marr 1991:225):

> By day boatloads of European refugees who had escaped through
> Romania could be seen coming ashore, their few possessions
> squeezed into shoddy suitcases.   Nightly again, at another club,
> another orange diva, this time Berlin, seduced us with *You Walked out
> of a Dream* ... the dream in which we were all walking - of true love,
> peace, permanence, an Israel visualised by all the Jews, from the
> tragic European forced settlers, the bloodiest Stern Gangsters, to the
> tough new race of *sabras* born in the land of their forebears.
> (FG:111-112)

Later, in *Riders in the Chariot*, he speaks of those 'thrown upon the
stones of Zion, (who) took root eventually and painfully, law of creation, as it
were. Developing tough and bitter stems, they resisted the elements because,
there, at last, it was natural to do so.' (White in Marr 1991:225)

His experience with a taxidriver soon after his return ('Go back to
Germany! Go back to Germany!') and the knowledge that he and Manoly
Lascaris were initially described by Castle Hill residents as 'foreign Jews
speculating in land' sharpened his sense of being absolutely unacceptable: 'I
knew what it was to be a reffo in Australia' (FG:112).

White's taking root in Australia shares the analogy of 'tough and bitter
stems' and his sense of identification is simultaneously angry, irrevocable and
full of love. Dorothy Green notes that 'White's disappointment with his own
society is a measure of his love for his country ... hoping that its white invaders,
as a nation, would show signs of becoming fit to live in it.' (Green 1984:68-69)
She also refashions a remark of Adorno in noting that White's '**hatred** of people
as they are, including himself, stems from his love of what they might be'
(*ibid.*:64). Part of White's vision for what we might be included a continual
expansion of our cultural understanding. While waiting for Lascaris to come to
Australia from Greece, White joined in the debate over European refugee
immigration.   After his war experience he was well aware of the misery of
displaced and war-exhausted peoples and the capability of Australia of offering a
healing refuge. But it is as well to remind ourselves that this was a time when
many artists and intellectuals were leaving the Australia of banned books and
inflexibly narrow attitudes to non-Celtic-Anglo-Saxon language and traditions.
Aboriginal peoples were not even citizens in their own country and thus could
neither vote nor share in the ordinary human rights accorded white Australians;
the State would continue the efficient and vicious removal of Aboriginal children
from their parents for at least a decade longer. Editorials of the late 40s

discussed the need for maintenance of the White Australia policy and the danger posed to 'culture' by any thought of its relaxation. Hostility to the newcomer was reflected in every aspect of life, continued to be powerful for the next twenty years and is still identifiable in many of our attitudes to languages, religions and social conventions which are different from those of the dominant culture.

White returned to Australia with the manuscript of *The Aunt's Story*, which reveals an Australian woman's 'descent' into madness and is set not only in Australia but in the *angst* of pre-war Europe where lost and threatened exiles and travellers sought shelter in the shadow of the violence of war. Although given good reviews overseas, *The Aunt's Story* fell on stony ground in Australia and this rejection reinforced White's self-perception as an outsider in his own country. He felt he might not ever write again. (Marr *op. cit.*:258)

It was not until the 1960s and the successful publication of *Riders in the Chariot* that White acknowledged change in Australian culture:

> We are a boring race, and the constant realisation of it makes me desperate. I do feel, however, that change is taking place, only very, very slowly: there is so much dead wood keeping the growth back. The heads of Establishments are still telling us what is good for Australia. English throwouts still flock here to teach us, and there is a dreadful atmosphere of Adult Education in which no art can flourish. (White in Marr *op. cit.*:383)

White objected strongly to migrants who tried to drop their 'old' culture 'in favour of the dreary semi-culture which exists here at present'. While castigating native-born Australians for their ignorance, he did, however, allow that 'a great number' did hope for the incorporation of 'something' of European cultures into what will some day be a true civilisation of our own.' (*Ibid.*:369)

He was not to accept the 1988 official version of Australian civilisation:

> ... we are still in the melting pot, a rich but not yet blended stew of disparate nationalities. And most of us who were transported here generations ago, either willingly or unwillingly, the white overlords and their slave whites, are still too uncertain in **ourselves**. Australia will never acquire a national identity until enough **individual** Australians acquire identities of their own. It is a question of spiritual values and must come from within before it can convince and influence others. (White in Marr *op. cit.*:633)

And a final bicentennial warning:

> The sense of real purpose - the life force - could be expelled from a
> society where leaders are obsessed by money, muscle and machinery.
> That society could - quite simply - die.' (*Ibid.*:635)

This linking together of individual and corporate identity with the highest
standards ('spiritual values') from all cultures represented in Australia pinpoints
White's dream of a 'true civilisation'. As for being 'uncertain in ourselves', he
acknowledged that he himself was always uncertain in the same measure as he
was certain, especially in the realm of religions and spiritual values. Recalling a
conversation with Sidney Nolan, White wrote: 'I had to try to tell him I was
altogether lost and just intended to go where I was led by whatever leads me
(God, of course, though it hardly does to go around saying it directly).' (White in
Marr *op. cit.*:485) Nurtured in the complacent Anglicanism of the grazier class
in Australia, White always intuited what David Marr calls 'the vision that
illuminates'. (Marr *op. cit.*:359) In much the same way that he despaired of
Australian society, he spoke disparagingly of the 'sterility', 'vulgarity' and
'bigotry' of the Christian churches. (White in Marr *op. cit.*:451) However, the
childhood information given him that 'God is everywhere' and which he found
'almost' convincing ('Is he in the bunya-bunya tree?') (FG:70) is rediscovered
and transformed much later: 'I am a believer. God is in anything, any religion,
any art'. (*Ibid.*:373) This is a God who seems fallible and cruel ('man is one of
God's blunders') because truth can be cruel and opaque. White thought that
even the sordid and shocking 'can still be related to religious experience' and
that 'the pursuit of truth is an act of worship' and this pursuit included the artist's
celebration of the world 'by depicting it in all its squalor and beauty'.
(*Ibid.*:472-73) This is no formula-'pantheism'; the divine after all is
unknowable. Searching for Truth is religion for White; all directions might have
validity including error and failure to discover what Beatson calls the 'Hidden
God' who is beyond mere religion.

Comparing himself with Lascaris in his secure Orthodoxy, White
described himself as 'a lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist
existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian ...' (FG:102). On
several occasions, White suspects Lascaris of thinking his religious
understanding a 'non-religious mystic circus'. (FG:146) There is no hint of
relativism or toying with a meaningless spectrum of pluralities however; no

pious tolerance of absolutely everything. What seems to matter in all this is the quality of the search. This involves curiosity, critique and appreciation of all the hints and clues hidden in the depths of landscapes, structures and human intuitions in all cultural settings and all possible times. As many of White's characters show, the terrible danger is in the human condition of flawedness: the potential for ego obsession, cruelty and manipulation of the weak and 'deviant' by the strong and 'normal' - the potential also for suffocating virtue and destructive innocence. David Marr notes that 'Waldo (in *The Solid Mandala*) is White's idea of what he might be if all the traces of love and intuition were cut away: a spiteful intellectual with a nose for failure, timid, fragile and unforgiving' (Marr 1991:449).

What White refuses is the setting up of clear boundaries. Positions are shifted, reversed and explored in their relation and hierarchy. Difference is never what it seems to be at first. White's 'circus' of a religion was never meant to be an exemplar either of 'good' religion or superior religious practice and should not be interpreted as such. White himself says: 'If I were a saint myself I could project my saintliness, perhaps, endlessly in what I write. But I am a sensual and irritable human being'. (White in Marr *op. cit.*:453)

This flawedness is one of White's certainties, as is his confidence that flawedness itself is the pre-condition for the spiritual unease and uncertainty which impels the very human (but perhaps divinely driven) and painful search for the truth, and ultimately liberation. Moreover, White believes that religion in this sense is the common giftedness/condition of all human beings.

One could not say that White had a reasonably thorough understanding of the major western religious traditions in an academic sense. But he might reply that being an 'intellectual' about these matters can be a stumbling block to sanctity. What he calls wit, imagination and intuition are high on his list of virtues. Let us not forget his diagnosis of the problems of his cousin Betty Withycombe who was a woman of 'principles and intellectuality': 'My most impressive cousin aspired, I believe, to sanctity, but was held back by intellect and ... (her) black looks ...' (FG:70)

In a letter of White written to Clement Semmler in 1970, he explained:

> I suppose what I am increasingly intent on trying to do in my books is
> to give professed unbelievers glimpses of their own unprofessed
> factor. I believe most people have a religious factor, but are afraid
> that by admitting it they will forfeit their right to be considered
> intellectuals. This is particularly common in Australia where the

intellectual is a comparatively recent phenomenon. (White in Beatson
1976:167)

There is no sense in which Patrick White offered solutions to the
problems he discerned and exposed in his writings and speeches. His role is
often seen as 'prophetic', the enduring tradition of an insider-critic forced to the
outside by an uncomprehending culture. Perhaps in some kind of diluted
modern understanding of this ancient middle-Eastern religious Persona, there
might be some truth in the observation. But within the full meaning of
'prophetic' there is no real likeness. White's creative imagination does not speak
directly, in the manner of prophecy and White was always suspicious of labels
burdened with such grand pretension.

Peter Beatson sees White as centrally involved in exploring what he calls
'the descent of the soul into matter' (1976:10), the human journey in and through
a fallen world. The world of matter for Beatson is 'the many ... the teeming
fecund world of generation and decay ... female, moist and rich ...' (*Ibid.*:11).
Although 'redeemed', it stands in opposition to the world of spirit and this
absolute and hierarchical distinction influences his view of White whom he
describes as

> moving among the members of 'normal' society like an
> anthropologist living with an alien tribe ... he penetrates, interprets
> and illuminates the secret springs of their nature, of which they would
> often themselves be unconscious. His alien frame of reference allows
> him to see things they cannot see ... Ultimately, one feels, he leaves
> the tribe and goes back to his own land from which he looks back on a
> country that has the vividness but also the evanescence of a dream.
> (Beatson *op. cit.*:129)

It is this judgement of a final retreat from the absolute difference of the
tribal culture that is the more common argument against acknowledgement that
White is one of us as well as not-being one of us. One gets the impression that
he never did belong. Even if one allowed validity to the idea of White as
anthropologist, the analogy does not hold of course. To a greater or lesser extent
the field always invades the interiority of the alien and the boundaries are not
secure. White's 'alien frame of reference' would seem to be a necessary
condition for his knowledge of things that ordinarily cannot be seen, as all
knowledge must be predicated upon difference. But equally, his complex
identification with the tribe is crucial ... 'they are what I am and I am they
interchangeably'; but this is anything but an easily transparent condition.[3]

White's understanding of the beauty and quality of 'cultures' (Jewish, Christian, Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Aboriginal, working-class, high society, all generations and genders, ...) of spiritual standards and how these can be subverted, drowned in squalor and die, reflects above all the shifting ground of the very notion of human culture and of 'religion'. Any and every culture and religion is incomplete and flawed and a happy and naive pluralism and excess of tolerance is the very antithesis of White's ideal. The paradox is that difference in itself is the ground of creativity and should be celebrated, in contradistinction to difference repressed in homogeneity; yet difference should not be absolutised. Clear boundaries are the stuff of illusion and truth is revealed in their transgression. Just when we thought we were familiar with Eddie in *The Twyborn Affair*, we find he is Eadie (and also Eddie): the same and different too.

<center>* * *</center>

Speaking from very different worlds, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak[4] has for me thrown light on White's role in relation to culture and religion, marginality and the 'centre'.   Usually labelled as a 'marxist-feminist-deconstructivist', she in fact resists such facile labelling ('I'm a very eclectic person. I use what comes to hand ... I'm more interested in opening up texts than in establishing, like some medieval scholar, the authenticity of a text.' (PCC:55)). As an expatriate Bengali Hindu living in America, she finds she is not at home in either 'India' or 'the west'. (PCC:83) As 'post-colonial critic' she finds herself both part of and separate from colonised India and also very much involved in, yet separate from the contemporary cultural politics of neocolonialism in the US (PCC:164). Consequently, and also as a woman academic, she raises the question of the 'margins'. She notes that the current notion of marginality 'implicitly valorises the centre', yet 'in the old days, marginalia were, in fact, rather important ... In the early print culture in the West it was in the margins that the so-called argument of the paragraph or set of paragraphs was written.' The marginal position is 'for the critic, a necessarily self-appointed position which is basically an accusing position'. She would thus like to re-invent margin as 'a critical moment rather than a de-centred moment ... I find it very troubling that I should be defined as marginal' (PCC:156).

So did Patrick White; yet in a fierce way, he stressed his marginality again and again. But never with the intention of valorising the centre; rather perhaps to retain his accusing position for which the 'centre' of consensus and

comfort (which may shift unnervingly to the margin), is a dangerous place, however longed for because of the loneliness of the margins. In the same way as Spivak reflects on finding herself uninterpretable in Delhi ('Very hard to tell if this is male or female' (PCC:88) and a suspected illegal Indian immigrant to Canada at Heathrow airport ('we can't accept you' (PCC:64)), White's 'outsider' experiences serve to make him reflect on centres and margins and the position of the critic. For Spivak, the critic is not so much the enemy of the centre, but its accomplice (PCC:156). In the same way as the structures of a 'text' must be validated and used in any deconstructivist reading of that text, which in turn paradoxically 'undoes' the very validity upon which the critique is based, so the 'centre' is both validated and undone by the 'margins'. Spivak notes that 'in a certain sense there is nothing that is central. The centre is always constituted in terms of its own marginality.' (PCC:40)

These reflections capture White's complex ambivalences and pinpoint the sources of the overflowing richness of his fictional worlds. White has opened up multiple readings of the text of 'Australian culture, using every aspect of his knowledge and experience of other 'cultures' and his own marginality and paradoxical relation with the 'centre' as strategies for understanding. Following Derrida, Spivak points out that 'knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity. What is known is always in excess of knowledge. Knowledge is never adequate to its object.' (IOW:254) However much White claimed to be a non-intellectual, it is the (limited) knowledge arising from irreducible difference in culture and religion that he searched to explore, always conscious of the excess which escaped him. The increasing presence of irreducible cultural and religious difference in Australia and the consequent transformation of our knowledge promised for White the gradual development of 'a true civilisation of our own'.

But what of White's celebrated intolerance and his everpresent critique of culture and religion? Surely this is at odds with the ideology of 'tolerance' we associate with a 'multicultural society'? In speaking of 'multiplying differences' as an alternative to essentialism, Spivak notes that anti-essentialism is just as dangerous. The multiplication of differences can become a 'pluralism of repressive tolerance'. (In A Word:147) This kind of pluralism does not acknowledge the practical challenge involved in taking difference seriously; nor does it take account of the limits of each person's power to comprehend difference: the inadequacy of knowledge to its object. Spivak deals with the limits by stressing the need to 'focus'. As a teacher, she would want to say to

her students: 'I can't do all of this. But I will share with you what I have learned about knowing, that these are the limitations of what I undertake, looking to others to teach me.' (*In A Word*:148)

In the same way, she speaks of the dangers of assuming particular responses from those who read what one has written: 'an audience can be constituted by people I cannot even imagine ... what I cannot imagine stands guard over everything that I must/can do, think, live ...' (*In A Word*:153). While showing an imagination and an engaging with difference that astounds the 'ordinary' reader, Patrick White did not ever lose sight of the need to focus, to listen and watch critically (and intolerantly) both himself and others ('I **am** unforgiving ... It is one of my worst faults ... ' (White in Marr, 1991:449)). What he did not know, could not imagine, as well as what he could not practically achieve was always painfully acknowledged. His intolerance arises from his acute awareness of the flawedness of human responses. Not for White facile inclusivity or any form of 'Eurocentric cross-culturalism' (Spivak's phrase) which pretends to inclusion of full understanding of an infinity of difference; nor for him, I suspect, 'adding' to the 'curriculum' without transforming its structures and without knowing the pitfalls and courageously grappling with them. About this problem in dealing with differences in culture, race and religion, Spivak (maybe somewhat enraged during a seminar at Stanford) had the following to say :

> I'm telling you that your solution to enlarge the curriculum is in fact a continuation of the neocolonial production of knowledge although in practice I am with you, because on the other side are real racists. The fact that this battle should be won does not mean at all that winning it does not keep a Euroamerican centrism intact. (PCC:159.)

White queried the deep structures of the 'curriculum' right from the beginning. He was well aware of the dangers of the cosiness of some intellectual solutions to the problem of difference in culture and religion, as well as oversimplification of the issues involved in the challenge to 'know'. Both White and Spivak have been criticised for their prose style and 'difficulty'. Both took these criticisms seriously in relation to **clarity**, but not **difficulty** *per se*. Spivak calls the 'anti-intellectualism' of some academics who demand 'monosyllabification of one's vocabulary within academic enclosures', a form of de-skilling of oneself and a condescending invitation to people 'to de-skill themselves' (PCC:57). Nor is the pseudo-tolerance of dialogue set up on the

basis of 'equality' and 'neutrality' an acceptable solution to understanding difference: 'The idea of neutral dialogue is an idea which denies history, denies structure, denies the positioning of subjects.' (PCC:72)

White's position as subject 'inside' and 'outside', never fully identified as either, is anything but neutral. The challenge he set himself he does not withdraw from others. There is no escaping the pain of confronting one's spiritual values in the widest sense. For White, it is this, as well as a measure of discomfort at the 'margins' that enables the crossing of the boundaries and the beginning of 'identities of our own', however much we cannot make a claim of identity that is not already under critique. We will have to learn to live with the uneasiness of that.

Notes

1   Patrick White (1983 edn.), *Flaws in the Glass: a Self-portrait*, p.143, hereafter referred to as FG.

2   Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair*, p.142, cited in Marr 1991:243.

3   Homi K. Bhabha's analysis of 'transparency' in his discussion of the power of the English book (and by implication the English scholarly tradition) 'as an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline' is very relevant to an understanding of the position from which White speaks. See 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817' in Gates Jr. (ed) 1986, pp 169-171.

4   For the purposes of this essay I refer to the following works only: Spivak, (1987) *In Other Worlds*, referred to in the text as IOW; Harsym, ed. (1990), *The Post-Colonial Critic ...*, referred to in the text as PCC; and Spivak, (1989) 'In a Word, Interview'.

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