A Poetics of Sacred and Secular in Australia

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This essay will explore the possibility of an open and fruitful relationship between secularity and sacredness in Australia. It will do this through reading a range of influential poetic texts published across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by Bruce Dawe, Les Murray, Lionel Fogarty, Judith Beveridge, and the joint authors of 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart': writers from different ethnic and religious contexts, for whom sacredness is a crucial context. The overarching argument of this essay is that secularity and sacredness are not necessarily polarised forces; that Australia's myths of secularity—often couched in nationalistic, masculinist, and white discourses—need to be opened up, to embrace diverse forms of sacredness; and, conversely, that sacred discourses need to respect and articulate the mutual values and visions of secular voices.

The Contemporary Sacred?

Sacredness is a multiple term. Going well beyond institutional notions of religion, it can refer to constitutive or foundational meaning-making or purpose, for an individual or a community (Kucinskas et al. 71). It can, differently, be the site in which destructively combative, othering discourses of meaning-making find a resting place, a composure (Ashcroft 36), instead of remaining adversarial, combative. For example, in contemporary Australian public life, references to sacredness inform gatherings where respect is paid to Indigenous elders, past, present, and future, and to their sacred stewardship of the land, even as many realities, many issues of difference in Australian Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, still remain to be addressed adequately, both politically and for individuals. A moment of peaceful acknowledgement enables a breathing space. Reference to sacredness hovers too, when, with civic dignity, the nation welcomes difference—secular, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian—into citizenship of Australia. How does the putatively secular nation of Australia imagine and seek to accommodate these multiple understandings of sacred belief and practice? This essay argues that it is no longer sufficient to declare Australia a modern, secular, post-religious nation, but at the same time to pay our respects to Indigenous expressions of sacredness and spirituality. How can the nation seek to acknowledge and accommodate Indigenous notions of spirituality, as well as the multiple faiths and practices of multicultural, multi-faith communities, when the category of the sacred is so occluded in so many dominant public discourses? The use of the term 'secular,' discussed more fully below, has come to mean both the impartial governance of difference, and also the neutralising or even repression of certain voices in the public sphere (Taylor 2).

So what and how does contemporary 'sacredness' signify? It can embrace that which is cherished and revered across deep time: a solemn, consecrated, sacramental meaning-making, and a place of composure. This composure is described by Heidegger as '"releasement". . . "calm composure," especially and originally that which accompanies an existential or religious experience of letting-go, being-let, and letting-be,' or *Gelassenheit* (Heidegger xi). Differently, the psychologically-inflected research of sociologist Jaime Kucinskas claims that 'meaning emerge[s] as richly patterned in everyday life and closely associated with—and often [as] a consequence of—sacred awareness' (Kucinskas et al. 71). This description of meaning-making

processes seems to resonate well for many Australians, though certainly not all, through their participation in civic acknowledgements of Indigenous sacred rights. Differently again, in 'Western' discourses, 'sacred' also complexly connotes a multiplicity of religious institutional affiliations, on the one hand, as well as deeply personal beliefs and values and languages: divine, religious, spiritual, angelic, godly, saintly, pious, faithful; terms which are problematic for many discourses of the secular Enlightenment.

Many Australian authors have written with a central address to sacredness in the face of what they have experienced as the militantly secular (imperial, colonising, governmental) twentieth century. We might include amongst those Australian authors who share sacred concerns, though certainly not the same religious traditions, Patrick White, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Francis Webb, James McAuley, Vincent Buckley, Randolph Stow, Peter Steele, Thea Astley, Les Murray, Alexis Wright, Lionel Fogarty, Kevin Hart, Judith Beveridge, Tim Winton, Sam Wagan Watson, Lachlan Brown and Omar Sakr. We might also include broader understandings of the sacred as approached by the Romantic poetic sublime, in writers like Judith Wright, Xavier Herbert, Kim Mahood, David Malouf, Kim Scott, Andrew McGahan, and others. In examining the categories of sacred and secular, what follows will allow the inimitable, magisterial and often antagonising voice of Les Murray, together with other poetic voices, to prompt us into thinking about what might be called the *poetic sacred*, asking what such a category can contribute to the future of a multi-faith, multi-religious *and* secular Australia.

Poet Sarah Holland-Batt, writing about the call of poetry on deepest human senses, recently wrote:

> Neurologists at Exeter University, using functional magnetic resonance imaging, found that reading poetry activated different brain regions to prose—even the lyrical prose we find in fiction. When the research participants read poetry, it lit up the regions of the brain variously linked to emotion, memory, making sense of music, coherence building and moral decision-making. Poetry. . . induces a more introspective, reflective mental state among readers than does prose. (Holland-Batt 18)

It doesn't advance our thinking very far to equate poetry with the sacred and prose with the secular, and Holland-Batt is certainly not doing this. But what can we make of such claims of poetic distinctiveness, and the enhancement of human receptivity expressed in terms like 'emotion, memory, making sense of music, coherence building, and moral decision-making'? Les Murray has brokered many of these human capacities into a highly original vision of the sacred interfused with, and sometimes combative against, the secular. Murray's titles, such as *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969), *The People's Otherworld* (1983), 'The Broad Bean Sermon,' 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' and 'Poetry and Religion' inaugurate a space which draws together the material and the sacred, the secular and the holy, rather than polarising them. Murray writes from local, vernacular, quotidian and earthy places, where claims to profound sacred insights are also ventured.

The Contemporary Secular?

But first we need to flesh out understandings of the contemporary *secular,* with which the sacred is in dialogue. In his highly influential volume *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor describes the historical changes which have led to the contemporary secular. For earlier societies, Taylor writes,

> the whole set of distinctions we make between the religious, political, economic, social, etc., aspects of our society ceases to make sense. In these earlier societies, religion was 'everywhere,' was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate 'sphere' of its own. One understanding of secularity then is in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the 'rationality' of each sphere. (2)

So, for Taylor, secularity controls Western public spheres in relation to human authority and rights, delineated as separate spaces that are 'allegedly emptied of God.' While Taylor proceeds to question and thicken notions of contemporary secularity, he does not deny its pervasiveness.

Differently, political scientist Spyridon Kaltsas, informed by Habermas and Casanova, approaches the contemporary moment in terms of the 'post-secular,' considering 'the impact and the role of religion in our modern pluralist societies.' In a 2019 article he writes:

> [Habermas's] concept of a post-secular society may be regarded as an attempt to rethink the boundaries of the public sphere through its relation to the ongoing presence of religion and the recognition of its social and cultural value by putting into question the mainstream secularization thesis which takes the decline of religion and its retreat to the private sphere as the necessary and inevitable outcome of modernization. (Kaltsas 1)

Australian cultural critic David Tacey in his books *Edge of the Sacred* (1995) and *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality,* (2000) also argues for the 'post-secular,' what he calls a re-enchanted world. But the secular—as championing and governance of pluralism, difference and multiplicity—is still a dominant idea in the discourses of the contemporary public sphere in Australia. Western secularism most often incorporates discourses of human rights and, in particular, individual freedom of choice as preeminent values. One recent site where sacred and secular have met in contemporary Australia, often in complicatedly hybrid ways, is in the debates around 'religious freedom,' ironically defended by many in highly secular terms of individual rights. Between December 2019 and January 2020 the Federal Government received 6,972 submissions (individual and group) in response to its call for consultation around the Religious Freedoms Bills ('Religious Freedoms Bills').

Sacred and Secular Dialogues

At less conceptual and more national, political levels, popular discourses of sacredness and secularity accrue around calls for 'belonging,' what equates to group meaning-making in contemporary Australia. For many Australians, sacred belonging may come from football allegiances, and sport in general. It can be espoused in relation to national affiliations found in the Anzac legend or, quite differently, the practice of larrikin humour, taking pot shots at tall poppies. In Australia, communal meaning has been sought variously (and in pockets still is) in ethnic roots, the Queen, country and colony. Belonging and sacredness are, it seems, closely aligned.

Capturing one strand of sacred belonging in a secular world, Bruce Dawe first published his much-cited poem 'Life Cycle' in 1967. With its mixture of farce and high reverence, it is a perfect snapshot of a kind of Australian secularity, an assertion of Aussie meaning and belonging in the present, earthy reality of football and 'the team.'

> When children are born in Victoria
> they are wrapped in club-colours, laid in beribboned cots,
> having already begun a lifetime's barracking.
>
> Carn, they cry, Carn . . . feebly at first
> while parents playfully tussle with them
> for possession of a rusk: Ah, he's a little Tiger! (And they are . . .)
>
> Hoisted shoulder-high at their first League game
> they are like innocent monsters who have been years swimming
> towards the daylight's roaring empyrean
>
> Until, now, hearts shrapnelled with rapture,
> they break surface and are forever lost,
> their minds rippling out like streamers
>
> In the pure flood of sound, they are scarfed with light, a voice
> like the voice of God booms from the stands
>
> Ooohh you bludger! and the covenant is sealed. (86)

For true believers, belonging, purpose, and ritual, sauced with 'a lifetime's barracking,' lead upwards—enraptured, 'scarfed with light,' attuned to the voice of God—finding identification with the crowd, your fellow barrackers. 'Life Cycle's' blend of sacred and secular rituals produces a kind of deep-seated larrikin belonging, one not afraid of excluding the other, as much as it includes the tribe. It points to the very real place versions of football have in the lives of millions in Australia and globally. In his essay 'Sport: Virtue and Grace,' sociologist John Carroll's discussion of Australian football as 'a secular means for tapping transcendental sources and powers' (97) examines one site of dialogue between sacred and secular discourses in Australia. For the minority of Australians less interested in football than in poetry, Dawe's poem may be of more interest. Whatever the case, his insights around dynamic meaning-making and the power of belonging that work through football can't be ignored. Contemporary issues of Indigenous belonging in relation to AFL and other football codes require their own history, and certainly another essay, in relation to both secular and sacred belonging,

Poetic Language

But what happens when we turn from football's earthy and vociferous construction of belonging, and its many representations in popular song and film, to ask what role poetic language might have in producing dialogue between secularity and sacredness in Australia? Another way of posing this question is: What has the poetic to contribute to public life in contemporary Australia? This is not to equate poetry with the sacred, nor with the secular, but to ask what happens when authors open up to all these contexts—poetry, sacredness, secularity—allowing them to speak with each other? In all these domains, to differing degrees, we encounter the struggle of values. In both secular and sacred contexts, what do we make of

the values of: remembrance; lament; hope; memory; prophesy; righteous anger; the realisation of wrong-doing; truth-telling; languages sought to speak the unsayable; the deep links between past and present; the need to hear otherwise through communities greater than the individual; the acknowledgement of creation as gift, as greater than the individual human? All these values and their affiliated actions permeate Australia's key secular, sacred and poetic texts—although the final three in this list are not always preeminent, on the one hand, in secular, individualistic discourses, nor on the other hand in a range of fundamentalist religious discourses. To use the term *sacred* is not to forget or occlude the material, economic and political, the domains of so-called secularity. To seek synergies or dialogue between the fields of secular and sacred, as this essay is attempting to do, is to seek new directions in Australian public discourses, where sacred and secular are not held as opposed categories, but allowed to interpenetrate as intersectional conditions. This argument for the intimate and necessary relation between material, political, embodied life, and sacred meanings, is not new, of course. The Jewish poets of the *Psalms* knew it. So have Indigenous singers and story-tellers across the millennia; and writers as varied as John Donne, Hildegard von Bingen, Gerard Manley Hopkins, C. S. Lewis, T. S Eliot, Patrick White, Frances Webb, Marilyn Robinson, and many others, have made claim to the dialogue between the sacred and the material, rather than seeing them in opposition. This essay is suggesting further that poetic language offers the *most significant site* for such dialogues, which are already alive in Australia's poetry, in multiple ways.

For Les Murray, pointing out cultural, public differences *together with* sacred resonances, quite often in poetically strident ways, was his métier. Something like stridency is awkwardly evident even in his poems calling for a respect for otherness, or an 'Equanimity' in the face of public differences. In his 1983 poem 'Equanimity,' we read his poetic propositions in the face of difference. Of the value of Australian and universal equanimity he writes:

> . . . there is only love; there are no Arcadias.
> Whatever its variants of meat-cuisine, worship, divorce,
> human order has at heart an equanimity.
> Quite different from inertia, it's a place
> where the churchman's not defensive, the indignant aren't on the qui vive,
> the loser has lost interest, the accountant is truant to remorse
> where the farmer has done enough struggling-to-survive
> for one day, and the artist rests from theory—
> where all are, in short, off the high comparative horse of their identity.
> Almost beneath notice, as attainable as gravity, it is
> a continuous recovering moment. Pity the high madness
> that misses it continually, ranging without rest between
> assertion and unconsciousness,
> the sort that makes Hell seem a height of evolution.
> Through the peace beneath
> (even within effort: quiet air between the bars of our attention)
> comes unpurchased lifelong plenishment;
> Christ spoke to people most often on this level
> especially when they chattered about kingship and the Romans;
> all holiness speaks from it. (179)

This poem is familiar to many, and one of Murray's most anthologised. The tone and the rhythms oscillate between the universal claim to equanimity and composure (*Gelassenheit*?)—love, human order, a continuous recovering moment, peace, plenishment, holiness—and an

underlying (perhaps less conscious?) rankling sense of difference which must be put in its place. Hence, the list of negatives that need to be dealt with if equanimity is to reign. Equanimity is the place where 'the churchman's not defensive,' 'the indignant aren't on the qui vive,' 'the artist rests from theory.' It is the place from which pity is offered to those caught in 'the high madness / that misses it continually, ranging without rest.' Arguably, the poem reads as if, psychologically, ontologically, the poet is reliant *on* the very differences he seeks to repudiate.

In 'The Angry Genius of Les Murray,' his 2011 *New York Review of Books* account of *Taller When Prone*, and *Killing the Black Dog*, J. M. Coetzee presents a terse and balanced argument, concluding: 'If there are a handful of purists who for political reasons will have nothing to do with [Murray] or his works, so much the worse for them—the loss is theirs.' Those are fighting words for many, who admire neither Murray's poetic claims to equanimity, nor his other ideological insistences. What precedes that final Coetzee sentence is a fine, clear-sighted and, in its own way, equanimous reading of Murray's achievements. Coetzee can poke fun at many Murray contradictions, but he also writes of the poet in this way:

> In a number of important poems from the early 1980s, Murray explores the state of mind (or of spirit) in which the poet makes contact with the divine. The key terms here are *grace* and *equanimity*, abstractions to which his poems essay to give body. The poem 'Equanimity'—which in its very tone is a model of even-spiritedness—concludes with a suggestion to us his readers that if we find the spiritual state of equanimity as difficult to grasp via the rational intellect as it is hard to achieve by an effort of the will, we may find it
>
> > *more natural to look at the birds about the street, their life*
> > *that is greedy, pinched, courageous and prudential . . .*
> > *to watch the unceasing on-off*
> > *grace that attends their nearly every movement,*
> > *the same grace moveless in the shapes of trees*
> > *and complex in our selves and fellow walkers: we see it's indivisible*
> > *and scarcely willed. That it lights us from the incommensurable*
> > *we sometimes glimpse, from being trapped in the point*
> > *(bird minds and ours are so pointedly visual):*
> > *a field all foreground, and equally all background,*
> > *like a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent*
> > *like God's attention. Where nothing is diminished by perspective.*

(Italics in review.) Coetzee parses the poem as follows:

> We should not be dismayed, suggests Murray, by the elusive, flickering, on-off quality of our contact with the numinous. Rather, we should learn to wait with equanimity—as poet or as believer—for the next flash of grace. Poetic insight and revelation are both, by their nature, 'intermittent, / as the action of those birds—crested pigeon, rosella parrot— / who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut.' (Coetzee online)

There is a delicacy and generosity in Coetzee's reading, declaring the rhythm, and 'the on-off quality of our contact with the numinous,' as the informing grace of the poem, and deeming Murray to be poet and priest rather than merely irritable, dismissive, or strident. Coetzee's is a

generous touch here, an allowing of Murray's poetry to speak no matter what the reviewer's or readers' ideological positions might be.

There is, however, another, less patient, less equanimous reading of the poem. It is possible to detect a sly stridency which I think Coetzee partly misses. It seems important (to this reader) to acknowledge the idealising dogmatism that informs the poem's sense of equanimity or grace: in its characteristic generalising ('all holiness speaks from it'); its dismissals built on cleverly snide oppositions ('it's a place where the churchman's not defensive, the indignant aren't on the qui vive, / the loser has lost interest, the accountant is truant to remorse'); as well as all those negatives listed above. And there is the poem's long list of enemies, which includes: all those still on 'the high comparative horse of their identity'; all those subject to 'the high madness / that misses it continually, / ranging without rest between / assertion and unconsciousness'—a bit rich given this poet's own assertiveness, grounded in Murray's many extra-poetical references against the theoretical (read, in part, academics), and his opposing of strident human will to what is 'unpurchased,' 'more natural,' less conscious.

So what are the poetic ways Murray negotiates the sacred? How is his dialogue between secular and sacred conducted here? It could be argued that 'Equanimity,' the poem, is dependent on its other, on its dismissals and generalisations, and its acts of exclusion. They form their very own human screen—will, and high madness, and ego—against which the premise of grace can be claimed, 'indivisible and scarcely willed.' This polarising fits with Murray's overarching argument to Australia, that he, his poems, and people more generally, are able merely to glimpse the sacred, be momentarily lit by it, but then are in need of acknowledging human blindness, allowing that humans are 'trapped in the point,' in partial perspectives. That quality of fine humility might also be recognised—arguably, momentarily—amongst Murray's stridencies and swaggerings; an often-visited need to bow the knee in the presence of what is beyond the human, of 'infinite detailed extent.'

For those who struggle to think of Murray's oeuvre as curving towards humility, a composed place of sacred submission, and who can hear only stridency in his dealings with anyone who differs from him, the critique of Sydney University academic James Tulip, in his 1984 essay on the humour in Murray's confrontations with Australian secularity, is salutary.

> Murray is often most serious when being humorous. But with a topic as difficult as Australian literature, religion and culture (of which we are only sure that the first of the three exists) the way in which Murray's humour allows him to operate as a prophet-jester through penetrating jocose sallies of mind and observation is valuable for its spiritual insight into Australia—reputedly the most secular society in the world, post-Enlightenment and post-Christian. (281)

Facing the vortex of differences—secular and sacred, racial, ethnic, gendered, believing and non-believing—in Australian society, this essay is asking how we might live *in and through difference*. The connectivity between that ancient pair, the sacred and the secular, is central. Such connectivity has certainly been crucial for poets such as Gerard Manly Hopkins, to whom Coetzee compares Murray, as poet-priests. In 'Pied Beauty' Hopkins draws the poetic, the earthed and the sacred together, in terms of difference, change, and humility. He praises:

> All things counter, original, spare, strange;
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

> He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
> Praise Him. (133, diacritics removed)

Hopkins, as he so often could, poetically embraced an earthed, changeable reality together with a power and beauty 'past change.' The swaggering, polemical and sometimes downright curmudgeonly Murray, together with the Murray who kneels, declaring his own unseeing, can be understood as not so incommensurable when we look at Hopkins's poetic yoking of differences, his own glorious drawing together of sacred and secular.

As we move from what many would dismiss as Les Murray's arch-white-settler forms of poetic sacredness, what can we make of Indigenous Australian poet Lionel Fogarty's deeply utopian poem 'Farewell Reverberated Vault of Detentions'? Does the category of 'the sacred' even apply in any helpful way to both Murray's and Fogarty's poetics? 'Farewell Reverberated Vault of Detentions' is a strangely haunting and hybrid poem, political and spiritual at once. The poem ties together the raw, earthed, suffering, politically circumscribed lives of 'my people,' and a spiritual, hope-filled, even utopian vision:

> Tonight my people sleep without a tang of fear
> No paralysed minds
> No numbed bodies
> No pierced hearts hurt
> The screams of madness ends
> The madly stretched endurance are resisted
> with Murri faith. (40)

The ways in which Fogarty presents us with both the bitter, fleshed realities of Aboriginal camp life—those lives on the margins of 'the public sphere'—and a driving hope for renewal through 'Murri faith,' form the dialogue between secular and sacred in this poem. The speaker's grief at his people's paralysed and tortured bodies and minds is met with gimlet-eyed realism, but also with something more. The keen sense of belonging—'my people'—distils the poem into a dimension which yokes the political and the sacred. There is no judgmentalism in the speaker's voice, but an informing empathy with 'pierced hearts' deserving of the better world the poet envisages.

And, differently again, in Judith Beveridge's shimmering poem 'Bahadour' sacredness is excavated in a political context, that of child labour, 'the deal that transacted away his childhood.' A child's transcendent beauty and acceptance, moving beyond mere rage and grief, emerge as the poem draws together the materiality and the sacredness of the child's life:

> The sun stamps his shadow on the wall
> and he's left one wheel of his bicycle
> spinning. It is dusk, there are a few minutes
>
> before he must pedal his wares through
> the streets again. But now, nothing
> is more important than this kite working
>
> its way into the wobbly winter sky.
> For the time he can live at the summit
> of his head without a ticket, he is following

the kite through pastures of snow where
his father calls into the mountains for him,
where his mother weeps his farewell into

the carriages of a five-day train. You can
see so many boys out on the rooftops this
time of day, surrendering diamonds to

the thin blue air, putting their arms up, neither
in answer nor apprehension, but because
the days tenders them a coupon of release.

He does not think about the failing light,
nor of how his legs must mint so many steel
suns from a bicycle's wheels each day,

nor of how his life must drop like a token
into its appropriate slot; not even
of constructing whatever angles would break

the deal that transacted away his childhood,
nor of taking some fairness back to Nepal—
but only of how he can find purchase

with whatever minutes of dusk are left
to raise a diamond, to claim some share
of hope, some acre of sky within a hard-fisted

budget; and of how happy he is, yielding,
his arms up, equivalent now only to himself,
a last spoke in the denominations of light. (95–96)

An Australian Buddhist poet writing about child labour in Nepalese and Indian settings is a wonderful example of Australian Literature as a world literature, something Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney examined in their 2013 edited volume of essays *Scenes of Reading*. The theology informing this poem might be parsed in many ways—as Buddhist resignation, as stoicism in the midst of the living ferment, as acceptance. But beyond the different theological explanations, what the poem speaks in its poetically sacred resonances is a freedom, and equanimity, moments of beauty as the child yields to his skerricks of freedom, entranced by the kite, breathing in and out, in order 'to claim some share / of hope, some acre of sky within a hard-fisted // budget.' Readers who seek only political dispute may not grasp the sacred impulses of the poem, might fail to see that the political is not occluded in 'Bahadour,' but is articulated together with sacred dimensions of dignity and joy, the boy 'equivalent now only to himself, / a last spoke in the denominations of light.'

For poet and critic Geoff Page, reviewing 'Bahadour' in 2005, the boy is 'taken out of himself into something more substantial, more transcendent'; 'Each visual element in the situation has been seen and transformed so that it has, in itself, something of the same transcendence that the young kite-flyer experiences' (14). Page's wonderfully material examination of the poem's

form, its subtle use of tercets, its rhythmic drive across the line breaks, its exquisite, fully imagined imagery, are linked to the critic's double sense of 'transcendence.' For Page transcendence seems to be a 'substantial' notion which, as he says, goes well beyond 'orthodox Marxism' and a political account of social injustice. The critic does not name this 'beyond' as 'sacred,' but as produced by a complex moral imagination, together with the poet's grasp of form, and empathy. I would go further and name one spring of Beveridge's work as the sacred, arising from her publicly acknowledged Buddhist beliefs, and producing this poetically rich glimpse of the sacred in a secular space.

In Beveridge's poetry sacredness is invoked through empathic feeling, but moves beyond mere emotion. 'Bahadour' demonstrates a keen recognition of difference, of worlds which are inescapably political, poverty-raddled, stoked by child labour; but is informed also by a core comprehension of dignity and human freedom, a recognition which has its references in both the sacred and the secular. Similarly, Lionel Fogarty's vision of utopian dignity for his fractured people shares this sense of sacredness, akin also to Murray's 'grace moveless in the shapes of trees / and complex in our selves and fellow walkers.' Each of these poets fully acknowledges the secular realities of the palpable, material world; and each points towards something more, glimpsed briefly through the rigors and joys and suffering of embodied existence, a sacred possibility which transforms everything 'in the denominations of light,' in the recognition of 'a continuous recovering moment.'

These poems draw on what I will call the *poetic sacred*. Sacredness in its many forms does not reduce to policy-making, nor political speech, nor simply information, though it doesn't exclude the centrality of such activities either. The poetic sacred calls on emotions and values—of elation, humility, seeing otherwise, hope, empathy, and diverse notions of transcendence—as it builds a crucible for understanding why the secular world of differences must work in relationship, and not in opposition, with the many forms of sacredness. The relationship may be volatile, expressed in myriad ways, but it is a choice, a relationship, a willingness to test the tension between earthed and sacred: a reaching out, in order 'to claim some share / of hope.'

Australian society—Indigenous, non-Indigenous, migrant, religious, secular, and the differently gendered—is at a pivotal point in the history of this nation. We are indeed a nation with diverse communities of belief and practice, and diverse attitudes about how to think through such differences. This essay is arguing that in opening up to the category of 'the sacred,' embracing with a multiple sense of sacredness, rather than weaponising the seeming oppositions between the political, embodied, material, and earthed, Australians might construct new modes of addressing our differences. The poetic sacred is one site of such proposed practices. But there is another key field of urgent discursive and practical 'opening up' we have not yet discussed.

Indigenous Leadership

Pivotal meetings around difference have been occurring across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but they have taken on a new urgency around the 2017 Indigenous document 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart.' Produced by a large and diverse group of Indigenous leaders in 2017, and duly rebuffed by Australia's conservative government, 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart' is both a political and a poetic document. Sacredness is named and represented in it, as both a material and a spiritual reality, and is claimed as the source of well-being for Indigenous peoples.

Two years before the Uluru meeting, an Indigenous Referendum Council of sixteen was jointly appointed on 7 December 2015 by both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to advise the government on steps towards a referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution. Delegates, numbering more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from around Australia, attended the 2017 *First Nations National Constitutional Convention* at Uluru. At this convention the 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart' was welcomed with a standing ovation. We need to register the wording and the deep gestures of this declaration which come together as both sacred and political:

> We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:
>
> Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial,' and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.
>
> *This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature,' and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.* It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.
>
> How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?
>
> . . . Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.* It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.
>
> We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.
>
> In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future. ('The Uluru Statement')

'Secular Australia' is arguably, slowly, coming to acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples, often couching acknowledgement in human rights discourses. But what do we make of the role of the poetic, and the uses of 'spiritual' and 'sacred' in 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart'? As I asked at the beginning of this essay, what does secular Australia, or the secular imaginary, identify as the grounds—moral, political, intellectual, spiritual—for the civic acknowledgements of Indigenous Australia by the wider society? Are such acknowledgements grounds for widespread celebration? What exactly is being celebrated? Is it a form of respect due to time and deep history? Are such acknowledgements expressions of a willingness, even a longing, to live productively with difference, to be truly (and often painfully,

transformatively) open to learn from the other? For a recent, dynamic and theologically-informed reading of postcolonial Australia's responses around Indigenous sovereignty, see Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (2008) and *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (2016). Brett, a non-Indigenous theologian who has worked over many years with Indigenous leaders, writes with a deeply dialogic vision of sacred and secular in relation to Australian identity:

> the unfinished business of reconciliation with Indigenous people . . . [t]he recognition of past wrongs and the restoration of mutually respectful relationships are projects that have barely begun. A critical theology requires the praxis of repentance and genuine dialogue with Indigenous people. Moreover, the construction of Australian national identity needs to free itself from legal and economic dependence on historic injustices. (*Decolonizing* 1–2)

In a movingly poetic and political register, 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart' offers leadership in how to embrace the secular and sacred together, declaring: 'this sovereignty is a spiritual notion.' The processes which forged 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart' were both political—seeking parliamentary and social action towards transformation—and deeply sacred, symbolic and affective, declaring that Indigenous peoples possessed their lands for sixty millennia, and that this link is 'sacred.'

However, in the fumblings of government as it failed to register the spirit of this document, a gaping wound still manifests itself in contemporary Australia. In one 'development,' Coalition Indigenous affairs Minister Nigel Scullion, in a 2019 parliamentary committee debate with Indigenous senator Pat Dodson, said scathingly of the Statement: 'It's more than poetry—that's what was asked for' (Allam). Secular, political processes of government, it seems, can be slow to learn from what they dismiss as merely poetic discourses. Nevertheless, many Indigenous voices are leading, as they bring together the poetic, secular and sacred dimensions of Australia's key struggle. The poetics of writers as diverse in style as David Unaipon, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Lionel Fogarty, Lisa Bellear, Alexis Wright, Sam Wagan Watson, Tony Birch, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Natalie Harkin and many others have provoked response in jointly political and spiritual registers. In, for example, the deeply affecting lament, 'We Are Going' by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, in Lionel Fogarty's strange and utopian 'Farewell Reverberated Vault of Detentions,' or in Tony Birch's historical, ghostly re-imaginings in 'The True History of Beruk (William Barak),' Indigenous poets and novelists have been leading, activating Indigenous and non-Indigenous political awareness through poetic processes which call on sacred and secular dimensions. They, along with many other Indigenous authors, have sought, in their poetry and their activism, to value: empathy towards others, asking for settler Australia's repentant admission of ongoing violence and cruelty, even genocide, against Indigenous peoples; prophetic remembering, so that the future might be deeply informed by the past; utopian retrievals and honouring of languages; and an ongoing acknowledging of rituals and other living practices which nourish meaning-making and community.

In addressing Australia's key public issues, this essay has argued for a radical move beyond mere religious platitudes, and beyond merely secular discourses of human rights, and their economic, material strategies. It is arguing for dynamic dialogue between sacred and secular, an opening up to mutualities discoverable through such dialogue. Developing an ear and a heart for the poetics of the sacred, exemplified in the practices and insights of Australian poetry, and in the leadership of Indigenous Australia, offers transformative potential for this nation's future well-being, sacred and secular. This is how poetic language can bring newness into the world.

This essay is dedicated to Professor Robert Dixon, an erudite and generous scholar, a leader in opening up Australian literary studies to the world. As an editor his openness to voices and arguments different to his own produced a rich harvest, and enabled many.

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