

ABORIGINAL RECONCILIATION AS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

David Tacey

The dreamworld is a frequent and natural place for white and Aboriginal Australians to meet.

Les Murray

There is a missing side to much of our public discussions about Aboriginal reconciliation, and this side involves spirituality and religion. In some ways, the spiritual dimension is far more complex than even the economic and political issues, which is why it is neglected or repressed. Perhaps Australian public life places the spiritual element of Aboriginal reconciliation in the proverbial too hard basket, hoping for some future light on this difficult problem, or perhaps hoping it will go away altogether. One way of avoiding the deeper moral and spiritual dimensions of reconciliation is by losing our focus in the bog of legalistic minutiae and in the quicksand of technical jargon. It is a cynical ploy of governments and officials to deliberately subvert the debate about race and land by making it a debate that only a few experts, equipped with technical knowledge and skill, can dare to enter. This is yet another way in which the letter of the law killeth, whereas the recovery of spirit would give us life. Aboriginal reconciliation involves every man, woman, and child of this country, regardless of race or creed, and it is a travesty of social justice if all of us are unable to contribute to the debate.

Several of my intellectual colleagues reach for their gun as soon as I, a white person from a European background, mention the dreaded word "spirituality" in connection with Aboriginal cultures. It is automatically assumed that I am advocating the cultural appropriation of Aboriginal spirituality, that white people such as myself have no business in that domain, and that if we are interested in Aboriginal spirituality we must be

up to monkey business, furthering the colonialist exploitations and assimilations of the past. Even if I protest that my own involvement in Aboriginal spirituality is non-exploitative and anti-colonialist, my critics will argue that I am just playing word games, and that we had better leave this taboo area alone.

As I will argue, the censoring or suppression of the spiritual dimension of this debate does not serve Aboriginal people at all, nor help to protect them from neocolonial exploitation, but merely serves to defend and protect the materialistic empire of Western intellectual discourse, which is threatened by the sacred and has no way to dialogue with it. The taboo silence and extreme sensitivity around this area is largely self-imposed and a very precious work of white social-political contrivance. It certainly does not arise from Aboriginal people, who are constantly encouraging us to extend the debate about reconciliation into the spiritual domain. I am convinced that the stone rejected by the builders of our official discourse about reconciliation can become the cornerstone of a truly authentic racial and cultural reconciliation.

But despite our secular prejudices and official attitude, spirituality is going to be impossible to avoid. Firstly, for non-Aboriginals to grasp the depth of the Aboriginal claim to land rights and traditional ownership of land requires an act of spiritual perception on our part. It is impossible for an economic rationalist to understand what Aboriginal people mean when they say that the land is their mother, or that the country is a field of ancestral spirits, unless we have been able to leap beyond materialist or reductive senses of reality. The Aboriginal view of the world is a cosmic one, a deeply spiritual and religious one, and if we lack soul or spirit ourselves, how are we ever to respect or appreciate the cultural and historical importance of this animated land for its indigenous people?

Aboriginal reconciliation will demand more from us than we have so far imagined. If land rights and indigenous custodianship is going to stick, to mean anything at all beyond cliches and slogans, we will have to move beyond the patronising pretence of saying "oh yes, the land is your mother, and therefore it must be important to you", and instead place ourselves in

the Aboriginal position, viewing the world the way our indigenous people see it. Without this kind of psychological or spiritual empathy, I believe our debate will wear rather thin, white selfishness will dominate, good intentions will be inadequate, political promises will be fickle and brittle, and we will forget tomorrow what we have pledged to do today. The land rights platform in mainstream Australia needs a spiritual basis, not so that white men and women can pretend to be white Aboriginals, but so that we can know and feel something genuine, to approach the land in a fuller and more complete way. Non-Aboriginal Australians need to engage in a leap of understanding, and to strive to perceive what living in an animated cosmos would be like. Then the reconciliation might achieve true status and real, transformative power. When our hearts have changed, we will be in a better position to change our minds, and our social and political policies as well.

Secondly, only spirituality can teach us the value of sacrifice. Many non-Aboriginal Australians do not see what we would gain, what we would "get out of" the land rights movement. We don't see why we should become excited about losing, conceding, or returning ground to its indigenous owners, or why some of our moral, legal, and material authority should be given to Aboriginals. Of course we don't understand this, because we are the erstwhile "winners", and the winners see no point in giving some of what we have falsely acquired back to the vanquished. While the culture remains focused on the white ego and its greedy desires, there will be little ground for real reconciliation, which calls for a morality unknown to mere greed or to the pursuit of instant gratification. This deeper morality, I would contend, comes naturally with a sense of the spirit, and this deeper morality cannot be legislated by the legal process or instituted by government resolution, but only brought into being by an activation of the human spirit. From the spirit's point of view, loss, concession, or sacrifice can be a gain. This is the whole paradox upon which religious experience is based, and which the rational ego finds so puzzling and so irrational. To the spirit, which has a larger sense of history and time than the ego, Aboriginal land rights is not a loss at all, but simply justice.

The Australian poet James McAuley closes his religious poem "An Art of Poetry" with this magnificent last stanza:

We know, where Christ has set his hand
Only the real remains:
I am impatient for that loss
By which the spirit gains.

This is simple, profound, and true, and I believe that more and more ordinary Australians are longing for precisely this kind of experience. Many of us are growing impatient for that loss of greed by which the Australian spirit gains. Most of our political leaders are completely out of step with this process. They still campaign on behalf of the greedy, white, colonialist and consumerist ego, whose cry is for more property, more wealth, and more exploitation of natural resources. In 1998, the conservative politician Tim Fisher thought he was doing his country a big favour by opposing indigenous land rights, and by delivering a morally corrupt legislation that brings to white Australia what he called "bucketloads of extinguishment [of native title]". Many of us would like to dump this bucket over his head, because the cry of this nation's spirit is for Less, rather than More, for justice rather than further exploitation. The human spirit finds the greedy ego's More to be heavy, burdensome, profane, unredeemed. It is more concerned with the quality of life, rather than with its quantity, and Australians today are looking for meaning, purpose, and justice, rather than "more of the same".

So this is the real dilemma that we Australians face. The people, and the institutions that pretend to serve the people, are moving in different directions. We have not factored spirituality, or the deeper morality that spirituality brings, into our secular institutions, which is just another way of saying that our institutions have become corrupt, whereas at least some of the people are maturing beyond the greedy ego and moving ahead. What kind of scenario does this produce? It creates a very stressful and dangerous social situation, in which the fabric of society could be falling apart – as expressed, for instance, in the widespread and epidemic wave of public disenchantment, distrust, and disillusionment in our political leaders and,

beyond them, to almost all figures of public authority, including doctors, lawyers, academics. If our public figures and institutions only work on behalf of the greedy ego, which is such a tiny or minuscule portion of the human experience, then in what sense do they have any authority at all? And if they have such small authority, why can't we divest it from them? Reform, rebellion, and dissent is in the air, not because the Australian people have grown wildly radical, which most of us are by nature not, but because we have grown tired and fed up with the mean little public ego and its tyrannical control over our lives.

There is, I would suggest, a kind of grassroots spiritual movement among non-Aboriginals about this political process. Reconciliation is, above all, a religious term: it is a word often used by the Apostle Paul in his letters and epistles. Reconciliation with the sacred, Paul reminds us, involves; and has always involved, sacrifice. The very word "sacrifice" comes from the same etymological root as the word "sacred", and the notion of sacrifice connotes "making sacred". The return of significant amounts of land and legal rights to Aboriginal people would certainly restore the traditional sacredness of the land to those Aboriginal people who have been dispossessed of it. But in addition to this, this same act will restore a sense of sacredness and justice to non-Aboriginal culture as well.

These spiritual gains cannot be underestimated. The gnawing emptiness that many white Australians feel at the centre of themselves is above all a spiritual emptiness. Many try to fill this emptiness with compulsive economic consumption, absorption in the mass media, faddism, cults, ideologies, alcoholism, drug addiction, and various other kinds of escapism, but at the end of the day the same emptiness returns, and our symptomatic behaviour does not give us any sense of enduring purpose or meaning. The so-called "identity crisis" of white Australians is itself a spiritual crisis: it is a sense of disconnection from ourselves, disconnection from the land, and disconnection from history and the world. Australians love to wander and travel, in search of connection, in search of a belonging that continues to elude us at home. It is only by way of a full reconciliation with the land and its indigenous people that any of these elusive attractions

– belonging, connectedness, identity, purpose – can be afforded us. These are the spiritual values and pursuits that fuel the grassroots movement that will transform this country.

I don't think we need to feel guilty or shameful about pursuing these values and visions. Some over-educated white people believe that whatever brings white society a sense of moral or spiritual redemption must be bad, because we are inherently evil and in need of punishment. A kind of old-world puritanism and punitive mentality has arisen in the very heart of our so-called progressive intellectual movements, creating inflexibility, intolerance, and lack of forgiveness. We have no business being in this country, and therefore any attempt to change the existential condition of our lives, or to reduce our fundamental anxiety, is seen as a product of colonialist exploitation and self-justification. I meet this attitude constantly in the universities, where rigid versions of post-colonialism become synonymous with self-flagellation and racism-in-reverse. This indulgence or wallowing in white guilt furthers nothing and no-one, least of all the Aboriginal people, who cannot be expected to feel that justice has been done merely because our intellectual elites are afloat in an ocean of guilt.

I don't believe that non-Aboriginal Australians are inherently evil, although we have certainly created evil in the past and need urgently to atone for this evil. The problem with the radical political view is that it completely identifies us with this evil, so that we feel pinned to the wall and unable to move, except to squirm at the pins of blame pointing into our flesh. At least some Aboriginal elders do not feel this way at all, believing in white society's capacity for self-transformation and reform, and holding out hope for our moral redemption. But the fashionable cult of guilt is out of touch with the complexity and flux of life, fixing us in an unregenerate pose from which there is no progress or movement. What post-colonial awareness does achieve, however, is a dramatic raising of the shadowy and evil side that has been systematically deleted and refused by the dominant mainstream consciousness. According to our national persona and our official story (what we tell ourselves about ourselves), we are still an heroic and blameless people, descended from pioneers who tamed an untamed

land. We are, in this forgetful discourse, adorable Aussie battlers and Aussie bleeders who fashioned a new society from a difficult and unwieldy continent.

Hence politicians such as Prime Minister John Howard reject the presence of evil in our national creation story. He believes this is a great country with a great and noble history. He will not subscribe to what he calls the "black armband view of history", because he reads our history only through the perspective of the conquering and conquistadorial ego, and will not tolerate any divergence from this view. The racy, get-ahead white ego suffers from an "inability to mourn", because it is fixated at the surface of life, and any mourning for past wrongs would likely drag it below the surface, where it fears it would flounder and drown in unassimilable darkness. This ego cannot afford to remember the past or to apologise to the Aboriginal people, because it lacks the depth of soul that would carry it through and beyond this process of mourning and deepening. In Jungian language, this national ego refuses its own individuation, and therefore, according to Jung, it renounces its claims to authenticity and growth.

Our superficial and semi-blind public ego sees no serpent in the Garden of its Eden, and has no awareness of its own sin. Prime Minister John Howard has a profane and secular vision, a vision without a sense of the sacred, and hence a vision without any regard for the reality of evil, or for the need to atone for our evil. Atoning for evil is a religious process, requiring an understanding of religious reconciliation. It is little wonder that a society that cannot understand religious reconciliation cannot get Aboriginal reconciliation right either. Both require an awareness of human evil, of the reality and inevitability of evil, and of our constant need to be redeemed from the burden of evil. We may all be suffering, I believe, from the continued fallout from the separation of religion and state, because although the secular state gets on with the business of economics and political process, our secular institutions are faced at almost every turn with big decisions that demand a deeper morality that can only arise from a profound and traditional spiritual awareness. A country without this deeper awareness is a country without a soul, and who among us imagines that our

present institutional system can deliver the soul that we all so desperately require?

The secular political institutions don't seem to realise how important morale and spiritual integrity are to the nation. If we want to put it in "economic" terms, we could say that purpose, meaning, harmonious race relations, a reduction in the burden of guilt have incalculable social value, and constitute the "social capital" which any political leader with sense would be able to recognise. The impact upon young people would be especially considerable, since they are the ones who feel and suffer the nation's lack of integrity more acutely than anyone else, and who internalise that lack of integrity as poor self-esteem and low motivation, often even leading to suicidal impulses due to a perceived sense of worthlessness. Acknowledging past evils and atrocities may seem like a small price to pay if it means that fewer of our contemporary youth, black and white, have to die because life as it is currently presented is not worth living.

It must be admitted, however, that the secular state operating with progressive social attitudes and high moral principles is able to perceive the reality of evil, and thus achieves a kind of "secular spirituality" in which the deepest truths of history and of the human condition are realised. In the 1992 High Court's Mabo case, Justices Deane and Gaudron described Aboriginal dispossession as "the darkest aspect of the history of this nation", which must "remain diminished" until a "national legacy of unutterable shame" is acknowledged. In response to this High Court finding, Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered his famous Redfern speech of 1992, in which he frankly admitted a history of "dispossession" and "national shame". But these profound sentiments were quickly silenced and stifled when the Keating Government was ousted from office by a general population that could not understand where these realisations were leading, or where they had come from. When we leave crucial moral issues in the secular domain, we place them at the whim of popular opinion, and justice glimpsed by a progressive government can be quickly rubbed out or reversed if the collective ego decides to withdraw its sympathy for issues relating to a higher order of truth. The political state separated from religion is a state

separated from the foundations of truth and justice, and relying on "good" governments to institute "enlightened" policies is a hazardous and risky business, when we consider the expediency of political parties and the fickle nature of public morality. I don't trust our political process as it stands today because it represents the claims of the ego, rather than the truths of the spirit.