Towards a Creation Spirituality in Australia

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Non-indigenous Australians imported a spirituality into this country that was not earth-based. It was, in fact, primarily heaven-based, and Adelaide theologian Norman Habel has even referred to certain excesses of our Judeo-Christian inheritance as *heavenism*. Our religious sights were firmly upward, toward heaven, the future, the after-life and the company of angels. We did not look too much to the earth, at least not for the presence of the divine or for spiritual inspiration. In response to the question ‘Where is God?’ Aboriginal people pointed to the earth, but we whitefellas pointed up to the sky. The task for Australians today is to ground our spirituality in place and earth. This is especially urgent, because the ecological crisis has forced us to see that we need to bring sacred awareness to the earth, which has been desacralised and profaned for too long.

A spirituality that matters

We need to develop a spirituality of creation, to remind ourselves that creation is sacred. The secular and humanist awareness has not managed to generate a reverential or loving relationship with the earth, but on the contrary has led to the exploitation and destruction of the environment. This patent failure of secular humanism must be compensated by a strong earth-based approach emerging from our increased sense of cosmic spirituality. Already we have witnessed several important books that have argued that a new spirituality in Australia will need to be earth-based and creational, including works by Catherine Hammond (1991), Eugene Stockton (1995), Denis Edwards (2004) and Aboriginal Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997).

Apart from the ecological emergency, there is another reason why spirituality must become a creation spirituality, and that has to do with the crisis of relevance in religion. In an increasingly secular and disbelieving culture, the majority of Australians are not convinced that heaven or an other-worldly God exists, and therefore there is no point in devoting energy or interest to things that are seen as illusory. Any spiritual practice based on heaven is liable to come to grief in this land and to be deemed irrelevant to human existence. People say, ‘If religion or spirituality is only concerned with the afterlife or heaven, then we can safely ignore it and there is nothing lost by this renunciation.’ In 1904, A. G. Stephens, a leading Sydney lit...
every figure and authority on the 1901 federation of the Australian states, wrote:

Our fathers brought with them the religious habit as they brought other habits of elder nations in older lands. And upon religion, as upon everything else, the spirit of Australia has seized; modifying, altering, increasing, or altogether destroying. In the case of religious belief the tendency is clearly to destruction - partly, no doubt, because with the spread of mental enlightenment the tendency is everywhere to decay in faith in outworn creeds; but partly also, it seems, because there is in the developing Australian character a sceptical and utilitarian spirit that values the present hour and refuses to sacrifice the present for any visionary future lacking a rational guarantee [quoted in Turner 1968].

What Stephens says is partly true. The Australian outlook is sceptical and disbelieving, our spirit is closer to existentialism than to theology. We hover at the edges of nihilism, refusing to take comfort from talk about other worlds, an after-life, heaven or hell. To many Australians, these are myths of the past, myths that have been exposed as fraudulent by education and science. Needless to say, the religious traditions and institutions that speak only of a God who is far away, interventionist and supernatural are destined to fade into oblivion and social insignificance. All through the country we see church buildings up for sale, and every time I see this I think to myself that this is a tragic sign in many ways, a symbol of a religion that was unable to ground itself in local experience.

Australians are not sentimental about the demise of religion, and many freely tell us that we are better off without it. But what we can say is that Judeo-Christianity remains artificial, colonialist and external to the psyche of this country. It remains an imported religion, not indigenous, until such time as we try to ground our experience of spirit in earth and place. Theology has been aware of this problem in the past, and it is called enculturation. A genuinely post-colonial spirituality in Australia would have to come to terms with place, to find its roots in our soil, in our experience of lived reality.

But here is where Judeo-Christian religions hit a real problem. We have been reluctant to focus too much on the earth, because it has not been emphasised by our traditions before now. There is little celebration of the earth in our churches or cathedrals, not many visible signs that religion in Australia is actually based in Australia and on this red desert soil. And if, as the poet Les Murray has written, 'God in Australia is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape' (1984: 115), perhaps God is not altogether at home in our sacred dwellings or practices.

**Earth worship and panentheism**

There is also the historical problem that Judaism, Islam and Christianity are sensitive to what they decry as 'earth worship'. Earth worship is frowned upon as heathen and pagan, and not representative of a religion that seeks to emphasise the transcendent dimension of the divine. God is not confined to things, but is beyond all things. Here theology can help us out again, by its emphasis on the difference between pantheism and panentheism. In panentheism, God is found in all things, it is true, but in the panentheist vision, all things are found in God, and this means there is still plenty of room for God to be greater than things. Some feel it might be a 'pagan' regression to focus on the earth, but...
I doubt this very much, and I believe this to be mere rumour and malicious prejudice. There are constant references to the earth, to its sanctity and goodness, in both the old and new testaments. We can feel God in the here and now without having to deny the existence of the greatness of the God of the cosmos.

In the Catholic tradition, there is a long line of mystics and saints who communed with nature, especially St Francis of Assisi, who found God in the world of animals and plants, in the simple things of the earth. We also have the Celtic background to draw on, which was intensely earth-focused and based on the sanctity of creation and the spiritual significance of rocks, streams and forests. Moreover, churches are now aware of this moment as a great opportunity to emphasise their relevance in a secular time. They can see that secularism has failed to link us emotionally and spiritually to the earth, and the more progressive souls in the churches are saying, 'Here's an opportunity to show leadership by showing how sanctity can be found in creation.'

Once sanctity is restored to creation, respect is restored to the environment, and one could almost say that the resacralisation of nature is the prime foundation upon which any ecological program should be based. I do not believe that an ecology without depth, without a spiritual dimension, can ever be effective in bringing about the revolution of attitude that we require. Secular governments plead with us to be more respectful of the earth, but such pleading is in vain unless we can feel that the earth is sacred.

The Aboriginal question and religious culture

Another major obstacle to a creation spirituality is the lack of connection between white and black Australia. We know that Aboriginal spirituality is earth-based, and has been so for up to 40,000 years or more. While many of us have ignored the spirituality of the earth because our heads have been in the clouds or looking toward the heavens, we have also bracketed earth-spirituality out of our culture partly because we have not wanted to enter into conversation with Aboriginal spirituality. Some of this reluctance has been positive and culturally sensitive, and some of it negative. The positive element is that we have often felt that the spirituality of the earth is Aboriginal cultural property, and we have been aware of this fact and reluctant to step upon areas that have not traditionally been ours. The negative side is that we have been reluctant to come to the table to discuss religious matters with those who are not part of the Judeo-Christian traditions. We have not been proactive with regard to cross-cultural religious enquiry, or to what is now called 'interfaith dialogue'.

Perhaps Euro-Australians have felt that our religious tradition is superior and should not be watered down by concessions to another religion deemed to be somehow primitive or of less value. Or perhaps we have been unable to discern the presence of God in other, non-Western religious traditions, and so have been unable to open up a conversation with a culture in which God can not be recognised because he does not wear a European face. But as Norman Habel has correctly surmised, the first question facing theology in Australia ought to be: 'What was God doing in Australia before the white people arrived?' (Habel 1999: 93). The idea that white people brought God to Australia in their ships and boats is utterly preposterous, and an arrogance that ought to be condemned. But until we can ask and answer this question, there is no way that Judeo-Christian and Aboriginal religions can have a fruitful or creative dialogue and conversation.

The Aboriginal question and secular culture

Beneath and below these theological problems is another social and political problem, and a different pocket of resistance. This problem concerns the presence of white Australian guilt. We know in our hearts that our European forebears appropriated this land illegally and immorally. The taking of Australian land was conducted under the banner of a legal canard called _terra nullius_, which the 1992 Mabo decision of the Australian High Court overturned and found to be baseless. The land was not 'empty' at the time of the first settlement of British colonists. It was very much occupied and inhabited, although the European consciousness was not capable of understanding Aboriginal occupancy. There were no town halls, no bridges, libraries or hospitals, and so to an ignorant consciousness it was declared uninhabited. We know better today, but the sense of inauthenticity remains in our hearts and souls. We realise we owe Aboriginal culture a great deal of recompense for our previous failures and misdemeanours, and the official apology of February 2008 has at least acknowledged this problem in the Australian psyche, and our need to face the facts of the past.

The Rudd government's apology is an important milestone in the tragic history of race relations in this country, but much more needs to be done. As well as symbolic gestures, we need social action and jus-
tice. Nevertheless, Aboriginal people are surprisingly generous in their willingness to accept our official apology, and also to work with us at the spiritual and religious level about the sanctity of the land. This is the phase of race relations that we have not yet reached. It is one thing to acknowledge white guilt, and political wrongdoing and injustice, but the next step is to enter into dialogue with Aboriginal people about the sacredness of the land, and what we can learn from them about it. Judeo-Christian culture has been shy and slow to embark on this kind of spiritual conversation. It involves courage and conviction, and also a great sensitivity to the way the spirit moves in another culture, another people.

Many bridges have been built at the local level, and the project of the Rainbow Spirit elders is a major achievement in the resacralisation of place. Also, there are many Aboriginal people who have converted to Western religions, and they are in an ideal position to lead the conversation we must have about the sacredness of the land. Although there have been grassroots developments, these have not yet been formally developed by the non-indigenous culture as a whole, which still remains slow to move in this direction. Secular authorities are reluctant to take the lead, because secularists are by definition not spiritual in their outlook, and don’t know how to begin a conversation about the sacredness of land. Secularists are plagued both by the sense that a conversation about sacredness is inauthentic if one does not believe in the sacred, and by the lingering presence of white guilt. It is hard to be authentic about land and place if one does not believe that one belongs in the land, because of political and moral injustice.

However, it has to be said that Aboriginal people are eager for us to sit down and discuss the sacredness of the land, and to make this the basis of the reconciliation of black and white Australia. They are astonishingly generous in their readiness to open their sacred business to the white intruder, and the problem is really with us. As Eugene Stockton has argued, Aboriginal people are extending the gift of belonging, but we don’t yet know how to receive their gift (1995). The theological obstacles stymie reconciliation for white religious culture, and the wound of inauthenticity and guilt stymie reconciliation for white secular culture. But Aboriginal people are ready for us, when we are ready for them. Just as they generously accepted the official apology, so they are prepared to wait until such time as the white Australian psyche matures to the point that it can receive the spiritual blessing of the land, which is at the same time an entrance into and belonging to the land. This is the next step in our ongoing reconciliation, and it might be some time before we reach this step.

Resacralisation of land and place

I would like to speak now about the resacralisation of place that we are experiencing in Australia, with a focus on my home town, Alice Springs, and the central desert monoliths of Uluru and Kata Tjuta. In the book of Genesis, we find the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, competing for the blessing of their
father Isaac, Jacob proves triumphant in this struggle, and Isaac says to Jacob:

May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful... May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien (Genesis 28:4).

This is a significant statement, especially from an Australian point of view. Entering into a binding covenant with the sacred enables Jacob to transcend his condition as an 'alien' in his own land. Relationship with the sacred yields tangible blessings, and central to these is the experience of being at home where one lives. In other words, in finding a connection with the sacred, which is what religio means, we no longer feel alienated or out of touch with the places in which we live.

The Genesis story develops this theme in a powerful way. After his father's blessing, secured by an act of treachery toward his brother, Jacob flees from the wrath of Esau and goes to the land of Haran. It was on his way to Haran that Jacob rested for the night and had his famous dream.

Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land' (Genesis 28:11-15).

This splendid dream-vision cannot be replicated by Australians at will, but the deeper meaning of it can be grasped by everyone. We could say that it is only when we have established a dynamic connection with the sacred that we enter into the vitality of our earthly inheritance and our bodily reality. It is only when the 'vertical' connection with God is forged, symbolised here by the stairway to heaven, that our 'horizontal' connection with creation is realised and our link with place, home, and natural environment is established. We come home to ourselves and our land when we come home to the sacred.

This is the deeper meaning of the two-way movement along Jacob's ladder. The ladder not only represents the grace of God coming down to earth, represented by descending angels, but also symbolises the reverse movement, the potential sanctity of earth and humanity returning to God, indicated by the image of the ascending angels. Jacob's ladder involves two-way traffic, and this has to be understood in its profundity and depth of meaning. In Australia, I would suggest, we must attempt to find or build our own Jacob's ladder, our stairway to heaven, so that we may find a new orientation to eternity as well as a new orientation to the holiness and sanctity of place.

A wonderful feature of the Hebrew story is that after receiving the dream-vision of the ladder, Jacob immediately notices the sanctity of his place:

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' Jacob was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.' Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz (Genesis 28:16-19).

This is a stunning portrayal of the transformative aspect of the religious life, and it has great relevance to Australia. Jacob awakens from his sleep, in which he is shown the vertical connection to heaven, and realises that the horizontal dimension around him is holy. The effort expended on strengthening the vertical link with heaven is rewarded by a transformative experience of the ordinary and everyday world around us. By recognising the divinity of the creator, we are vouchsafed a vision of the holiness of his creation. We glimpse the visionary prospect of a world made holy through a sanctifying presence. That presence was always there, but we did not see it before.
The Great South Land of the Holy Spirit

Australia is not a biblical 'holy land', but it is holy for Aboriginal people, and many others as well. Perhaps we should take a cue from the Spanish Catholic explorer, Pedro de Quiros, who in 1606 named this as yet undiscovered and unsighted land *Australia del Espíritu Santo*, the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. This visionary Australia is still undiscovered. De Quiros did not see it, and we still don't see it, but we are beginning to catch glimpses of it. Some of us are, like Jacob, waking up from our sleep or cultural stupor, as Ronald Conway put it, and realising that the ground upon which we are waking is holy. 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it!'

This is what more Australians are saying about their perception of place and landscape - although not using this same language, of course.

Jacob pours oil over his stone to consecrate it and signify its holiness. We are doing similar things in Australia with our stone, with Uluru Kata Tjuta. Before our awakening to the sacredness of place, this stone was just called Ayers Rock, and it was seen as an interesting lump of a monument, which we liked to climb over and 'conquer' by reaching the summit. But it is extraordinary how public feeling has shifted in recent years. The place has changed its name, as in the Jacob story, and we have come to respect its sacredness in a new way. Jacob changed the name of his place from Luz to Bethel, meaning 'the house of God', and we have changed the name of our stone from Ayers Rock to Uluru, meaning 'sacred Dreaming place'. Moreover, in 1985 we gave it back to its traditional caretakers, the Anangu people. This is a crucial act in the process of making sacred: to sacrifice ownership of the place, which was wrongly taken in the beginning, is to restore dignity to land and its people. *Sacrificium* literally means in Latin to 'make sacred'. Many of us no longer scurry over the rock like tourists, but we respect it as a symbol of the sacredness of land.

In the past, white people were merely tourists, but I submit that some of us now are pilgrims as well, in that we recognise we are visiting a holy place and adopt an appropriately reverential attitude. The Anangu people request that we do not climb the Rock or desecrate it, and that we are mindful of what we capture in our photographs and movies. These elements of respect and awe are our equivalents to Jacob's anointing his rock with oil. We have acquired a new sense of the sacredness of the Rock, which is no longer a monolith in a dead heart but a symbolic marker or icon in a living centre. In mythological terms, Uluru Kata Tjuta has become for us an axis *mundi*, a centre-point from which we gain our spiritual bearings and orientation. Around that centre, we lead our lives, increasingly mindful of the sacredness of the centre, even if we huddle along the coast.

It has taken us two hundred years to wake up, but we are waking up to the sacredness of the Rock, and through the Rock to the sacredness of the continent in its entirety. We acknowledge that the place was already sacred before we arrived here from European and other nations. In this sense, the two-way movement on our Jacob's ladder has an additional significance. It must carry and hold the traditional Dreaming of the Aboriginal people and the new Dreaming of the new Australia. Angels are walking in both directions, from the ancient past and into the future. We newly awaken to the
sacredness of the land and to the prior and present sacredness of the Aboriginal people. ‘As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end."

**Down-to-earth divinity**

Renewals of the spirit come from the most unlikely places. This has been so throughout history and it is so today. Australia is an unlikely place for spiritual renewal, given our suspicion of religion and our down to earth attitudes. But it is precisely these attitudes that could give rise to something new and original in the religious landscape, namely, to the sacrality of the secular and the mystery of the ordinary. The development of Australian spirituality will show that God is not confined to places designated as ‘holy’, and God’s existence does not require an act of belief in miracles and wonders. The miraculous is always-already inherent in creation as its mystical core. As Tillich put it in his radical theology, God is no longer believable as a ‘being’ up in the sky but a new world opens when we see God as Being itself. ‘The God whom we cannot flee is the Ground of our Being’ (Tillich, 1949: 54).

I see Australia playing an important role in this new perception of God. We are not enthusiasts for or believers in the supernormal. One of our major contributions will be to show that God is immanent and present in creation. God is not only the Lord of Heaven and the Future Life, but our partner and intimate companion in this life. Our high culture, literature, and music are concerned with the sacramentalisation of the everyday, the enchantment of the ordinary. Whether we turn to the novels of Patrick White and David Malouf, the poetry of Les Murray and Judith Wright, the drawings of Michael Leunig, or the music of Peter Sculthorpe and Ross Edwars, we bear witness to sublime values and concerns found in ordinary places, people and things.

The poet Les Murray puts this well, when he writes of our spirituality:

*What we have received
is the ordinary mail of the otherworld, wholly common,
not postmarked divine.*

(First Essay on Interest, 1986: 153)

This is a wonderful expression of Australian spiritual pragmatism, which can look like atheism to an eye not trained to discover sacred resonances in the ordinary. For Australians, if God exists, God is to be uncovered in this world. We cannot know of heaven, hell or the next world. If there is anything sacred, let us discover it in the here and now. There is an impatience in the Australian character that derides any metaphysical position that takes our attention from this world. If the sacred can be revealed in the depths of what we already experience, then so much the better, but sacredness apart from this world is seen as theoretical or academic, and of little national concern.

In this sense, A.G. Stephens was right: Australians are concerned with the here and now and we are focused on the present hour, but this will not drive us to the materialism that Stephens advocated. For the present hour will include a spiritual dimension, since the spiritual will no longer be relegated to another world, a life beyond the grave, or to the heavens above. The spirit will be revealed as a dimension of the real, and we will be called to witness to the depths that are part of the present reality.

Here we may be influenced by the indigenous traditions, in which sacred presence is perceived as immanent and this-worldly. For Aboriginal people, everything is potentially sacred, and the vast expanses of rock, sand, and desert are ‘cathedrals of stone’ in which the sacred is recognised and worshipped (Charlesworth, 1998). Aboriginal spirituality is chiefly a tradition of transparency, in which the numinous shines through the forms of the world. In Australia, ancient and postmodern perceptions of the sacred are bound to coalesce and interact with each other. This is perhaps what Max Charlesworth had in mind when he wrote:

*I have a feeling in my bones that there is a possibility of a creative religious explosion occurring early in the third millennium with the ancient land of Australia at the centre of it (1992: 287).*

**Selected References:**


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