

EMERGING FROM THE SHADOW

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THEOLOGY IS NECESSARILY DIALECTICAL, necessarily suspended between divine revelation and human experience, since it meditates upon the God who shows himself in human form. *Kenosis*, the shedding of the fullness of divinity, stresses the significance of our humanity, involving God in human history and culture where he goes on speaking to us. The great question is thus to find where he may be speaking today and to respond in the depth of our human and historical experience.¹

We Australians like to think of 'our Country' as the 'place of the new beginning'. In fact, however, it was founded—for us: it is different for the Aboriginal Australians—under the law of 'Ananke', of revenge. Colonization was often, usually perhaps, a violent and often brutal process. It was especially so here. Australia originated as a penal colony and subsequent expansion into the interior and development of the land and its resources entailed a long, if undeclared war against the original inhabitants, their dispossession from their land as well as the killings, rape and psychological violence which are the concomitants of war, especially of wars of conquest. In some places, notably in Tasmania, there were systematic attempts at genocide. Elsewhere massacres of Aboriginal people continued in isolated parts of the country into the twentieth century. To this day our Aboriginal people are amongst the most highly imprisoned people in the world.

But the first settlers were also victims of this law of revenge. Many of them poor, dispossessed or persecuted, were the victims of power. The origins of what we Australians like to call the 'Lucky Country', are thus bound up with an 'original sin', with a kind of captivity, a social situation, with alienation. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, theologically, 'the sinner is thus "in" the sin as the Hebrew was "in" bondage, and sin is thus an evil "in which" man is caught'.² The situation is both personal and communal, known only to God in its reality and truth, an imprisonment which hardens us and holds us captive. But it is this experience of captivity, to

the extent that we acknowledge it, which makes Australia perhaps the place of a 'new beginning' for Christendom, because the society and culture which we have made since 1788 are the product of Europe—they have nothing to do with the Aboriginal culture, a subtle, complex and profoundly religious culture which had developed over at least forty thousand years.

Christendom, however, has not been very ready to acknowledge this problem of origins and this may be one of the profoundest problems facing us as Christians today—I write this at the time of confrontation with Islam in the Middle East. But Australia today, as in the past, exemplifies this problem, the complicity of Christendom with the European conquest of the rest of the world, a conquest which rests on the perversion of Christianity in which white is set against black as good against evil, believer to unbeliever, civilized to savage, superior to inferior.³

This means, however, that our society depends in some measure at least on pseudo-theological justification, the identification of Christianity with Europe and of white people with God's chosen people.

At the same time, the actual story, the human reality of settlement, was very different. The first Europeans settlers were either convicts or their unwilling guards, victims also of the law of retribution. The free settlers who followed were not very different. Most of them also, like many if not most migrants even today, obliged to leave their own countries by force of circumstance, were also, in a sense, disinherited. Henry Kingsley expresses this vividly in *The recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*:

And then came the disturbance of the household gods and the rupture of life-old associations . . .

Only those who have done so know how much effort it takes to say, 'I will go away to a land where none know me or care for me, and leave forever all that I know and love'. And few know the feeling that comes upon all men after it is done—the feeling of isolation, almost of terror, at having gone so far out of the bounds of ordinary life; the feeling of self-distrust and cowardice at being alone and friendless in the world, like a child in the dark.⁴

The sense of disinheritance here is poignant. But this poignancy points also to another possibility. If the 'household gods' have been disturbed, the possibility arises that they might be replaced.

By and large, however, this has not happened, though the reasons why it has not are understandable. The frontier is by definition a place of exposure. Here, bereft of the protection of culture, tradition and habit, one is open to the sheer pressure of physical necessity, brought up short before questions of survival so that preoccupation with material prosperity, the preoccupation of the poor, follows.⁵ This preoccupation in turn, however, often becomes a way of practical atheism, to the extent that value is defined in terms of money, consumption becomes a virtue and money the way of it. As a result, life loses its dimension of mystery and other people and the environment turn into objects for manipulation. So,

. . . The ultimate men arrive
Whose boast is not 'we live' but 'we survive',
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.⁶

This is the shadow. Nevertheless, the possibility remains of emerging from it, and this is our subject. Europe and Western culture generally may still hold to some residual belief in the Enlightenment, in its trust in human reason and perfectibility, and America (which includes Canada) may still seem to confirm this belief. But the Australian experience disallows it, for a variety of reasons, historical and geographical. Historically, as we have seen, our convict origins and our subsequent treatment of the Aborigines makes fairly clear that the Enlightenment's dream of reason may in fact in the long run produce monstrous results. Geographically, in Australia the strangeness of the environment interrogates reason, pointing beyond it, challenging the myth of control. In both ways therefore Australia may question the alliance between Christendom and the cultural, social and political order, the alliance which thinkers as varied as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have also interrogated.

This challenge, however, is important theologically—God's coming is best seen as an interruption. The strangeness, the sense of exile, many of us still experience here is in Christian terms an occasion of grace, since, as Schillebeeckx puts it, the 'hermeneutical principle for the disclosure of reality is not the self-evident, but the scandal, the stumbling-block of the refractoriness of reality'.⁷ Australia then, may be the place in which Europe, Christian Europe, may emerge from the shadow of the God who may be its projection.

First of all, the sheer strangeness of the geography challenges our technological complacency. The Hebrew-Christian vision, born in the desert, must take the desert as its point of reference. European Christianity, however, still clings to the Enlightenment, to the God who can be defined in terms of human reason, who blesses human culture generally and Western culture in particular. In the desert such certainties tend to fall away and God reveals himself more as a question or series of questions than an answer. So José Faur has argued that

Ultimately, the whole issue as to whether there is a Creator or whether the universe simply *is* revolves on whether one wishes to regard this world in the Greek or in the Hebrew fashion.⁸

In contrast with the Greek world-view in which human beings are in charge of their world and of their existence, for the Hebrews, God is sole Lord and master. His will and his ways, mysterious as they are, are foremost and ultimately meaningful, not ours.

The important point here, in contradistinction to the Enlightenment thinking which has tended to govern Christian and especially Catholic thinking, is the notion of the mysteriousness of God, the God beyond gods. It is to this notion that Nietzsche points with his proposition that 'God is dead,' a proposition which many Christians have found deeply troubling. As Ricoeur points out, however, it may in fact be liberating, may overthrow our false ideas of God. What we need first of all, he writes,

is to know, first of all, which God is dead; then, who has killed him (if it is true that his death is a murder); and finally, what sort of authority belongs to the announcement of this death.⁹

In a secular society like Australia, it is fairly clear that the cultural God of Christendom is, if not dead, at least in a terminal state, poisoned initially perhaps by the association with authority in the penal beginnings, with unjust power. What killed him was the failure of religious imagination involved. Instead of being on the side of the poor and oppressed, the official Church, the Anglican Church in particular, blessed the *status quo*. Announcing the death of this God of the *status quo* thus means announcing the possibilities of the living God of Christianity who was the friend of the oppressed.

This may seem a bleak announcement. Nevertheless it speaks to the colonial experience, and the way forward thus lies in exploring this experience, especially as it so clearly fits with the scriptural paradigms of Exodus and Exile. It is perhaps not accidental, therefore, that our unofficial national anthem, the folk song, 'Waltzing Matilda,' is a song about an exile and a wanderer who chooses to die rather than surrender his freedom, or that the poet Christopher Brennan writes of 'Man the wanderer on the way to the self'.¹⁰ In turn, in the story of Israel, the desert experience leads to the encounter with Yahweh in the desert, and this is implicit in our experience also.

For non-Aboriginal Australians, the land has figured not so much as fertile and abundant but as the antagonist, as other. In *Voss* and *A fringe of leaves*, the novelist, Patrick White, explores the land in this sense, contrasting those who refuse to move into the interior, clinging to the fringes of themselves as to the fringes of the continent, with those who 'dare to go further', to confront the mystery of the desert or, in *A fringe of leaves*, of the wilderness within them. The nineteenth-century writer, Marcus Clarke (who was, incidentally, a school friend of Gerard Manley Hopkins and kept up a correspondence with him), expresses a similar intuition. For him, the dominant note of Australian scenery was a 'weird melancholy', a melancholy which came from the sense of displacement we have been discussing. But he also sees it as a preliminary to some further encounter:

Australia has rightly been named the Land of the Dawning. Wrapped in the mystery of early morning, her history looms vague and gigantic. The lonely horseman riding between the moonlight and the day . . . hears strange noises in the primeval forest where flourishes a vegetation long dead in other lands, and feels, despite his fortune, that the trim utilitarian civilization which bred him shrinks into insignificance.¹¹

Human mastery gives way here as, like the Israelites in the desert, he confronts the reality of danger, hardship and death, of subjection to physical necessity. Human beings are no longer lords of creation; the Book of Nature in which we imagine ourselves the central referent seems closed. Instead Clarke sees only 'the scribblings of Nature learning to write',¹² drawn back to origins in which we seem to have no part, brought up before the mystery of creation.

No doubt there are echoes here of the shock Darwin's thought posed so powerfully in the nineteenth century. But this is surely an important moment for Christian faith also, to the extent that it points beyond culture, beyond the idols we are all too ready to make for ourselves, the projections of emotional and social need, to the God of Sinai and of the Burning Bush, the God who was crucified. If the Book of Nature is closed, then we are driven to the Book of God in his creation to find his hand in what may appear to be mere scribblings.

This question of God is, of course, the central problematic of faith. With the triumph of Christendom, it has been increasingly clear that what many of us call 'God' may be our own production, the justification of our needs. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have all underscored this point, and the world-wide renewal of Islam, with its insistence on the sheer otherness of God, makes the question even more urgent today. But here in Australia, at what may be one of the extremes of Western Christendom, this experience of the desert reopens the question—if we are prepared to take it. The God of the desert is the God who shows himself in this mysterious landscape beyond anything we can conceive of or control, who goes before us calling us into his mystery, challenging all words and thoughts about him. 'Whether He is Being or the master of Beings, God Himself is, and appears as what He is, within difference, that is to say, as difference and within dissimulation.'¹³ If creation appears to us inscrutable here, it nevertheless remains the book of God's creation, writing which is living and active, constantly creating new possibilities in those of us who try to read it, drawing us into the mystery of a God 'whose being is' in his coming, who 'makes himself accessible in that he goes on ways to himself'.¹⁴

By definition this God stands over against and confronts the 'cheap grace' of a merely cultural Christianity. This is so not merely because the difficulty of the environment itself contests the complacencies of a materialist and consumerist culture but also because, as we learn to read what has been written in the land, we also come to discern the story of the first inhabitants, whose sense of reverence, of the holiness of God's creation and whose ability to read God's story there contrasts with our profanation, and whose fate puts to the question our history and our sense of ourselves.

Questioning, however, is the beginning of renewal. As it was the Fall which precipitated the journey to the Promised Land and the desert wanderings take on their true meaning only in relation to the imprisonment in Egypt, so it is only when we really know our need of God, when we have reached the end of our human resources, that we are properly open to the liberation grace brings. True, this emphasis may not be popular today when the stress seems to fall rather on 'original blessing'. But history cannot be denied, nor the fact that colonization was often justified on theological grounds, in the Manichean allegory which set white against black as good against evil, godly against ungodly, civilized against savage, superior against inferior.¹⁵ This may well be one of the reasons why the God of European Christianity seems to many increasingly ungodly.

This is not the place to detail the consequences of this heresy, the offences it entailed against the original inhabitants of Australia. The point here is rather that the God we made to our own image who justified those offences is not the God who gave himself to us in Jesus, in whom there is no division of race, class or gender but who calls us all to carry on his work of love, recognizing and serving him not only in his creation but in others, especially in the 'least of his brothers and sisters'.

The mystery of the desert thus begins to expand, revealing that other desert, the desolation which lies at the heart of our aggressive, competitive and materialist Western culture. In this sense, it becomes the desert of Ezekiel's vision¹⁶ of the valley of dried bones—and one of our ballads characterizes the interior as 'the place where the dead men lie'.¹⁷ But in that vision, of course, God breathes new life into these bones, and the desert, the place of desolation, becomes the source of new life. Significantly, our writers also point in this direction. We have already referred to Patrick White. In *A fringe of leaves*, a later reworking of *Voss* which explores the journey into the desert, he links this renewal even more explicitly with the Aborigines. His central character, Ellen Roxburgh, finds who she truly is through her encounter with them, enduring with them the hunger, humiliation and physical hardship which are the consequences of our invasion and discovering there the God who is not the conquerors' 'God of the winning side' but the crucified One whose power is weakness in the world's eyes and whose dignity is worldly indignity.

Put in more general terms, the Aborigine may function for us, as oppressed people throughout the world may for Western culture generally, as the Suffering Servant, the living embodiment of the consequences of our idolatry, 'wounded for our iniquities, bruised for our sins',¹⁸ and thus open the way to the mystery of the sacred, the glory. If we and Western Christendom very badly need to recover a sense of the sacred, of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, then we may find it here, in the mysterious survival and continuing hope of these suffering people. Secular society tends to be one-dimensional and its religion to be oriented away from the dimension of mystery, defending us from rather than opening us out to the challenge of chaos, evil and death. But here they confront us, bringing us up before the mystery of crucifixion and the strange logic it proclaims, that God's power is like powerlessness, God's riches like poverty and God's way of life an offence.

Seen in this light, our painful beginnings point to the possibilities of a new affinity with those whom we in our turn have persecuted. 'In the "godless" death of the Son of God, outcasts are accepted, the unrighteous are made righteous and justice is secured for those without rights.'¹⁹

In one of his novels, *To the island*, another Australian writer, Randolph Stow, explores the possibilities of reconciliation implicit here. His main character, Heriot, overburdened with guilt for what he has done to the Aborigines and disillusioned with the Christianity which has justified it, journeys out into the interior, wanting to die there. But on the way coming upon an Aboriginal camp, he sits down with them, sitting down beside an old Aboriginal woman who is also blind:

In that way, they sat for what seemed a long time in that timeless place, naked brown woman by naked white man, and he stroked the loose skin of her back with tenderness, wanting to laugh, wanting to weep.²⁰

Similarly, in David Malouf's *An imaginary life*, the highly sophisticated poor Ovid, in exile at the edge of the known world, finds what he has always been longing for, the lost child within him, in the 'savage' child he encounters in the wilderness. Thinking first of all to teach the child his language he learns finally from him the 'language of the earth', the language of worship and praise.

Evidently, today, the whole world is at a turning point. But this is especially so for the West and for Christendom. The old paradigm

by which we lived for so long will no longer do, the paradigm of exploitation and control. Instead, we must perhaps learn to 'let go, let be', learn once again from people we despised, the mystery of 'silence, simplicity and humility' which is the mystery of the God of Israel who came to us in Jesus of Nazareth. In God's logic, therefore, the crisis we face may be the moment of liberation. The pilgrim people must move on, away from their certainties and complacencies, as we respond to the God who is always ahead of us, whose being is in his coming.

Here in Australia we have this opportunity in a special way, since on the one hand the emptiness of Western materialism, undiluted by memories from the past of other ways of living, is most clearly and poignantly revealed here, and on the other we see in the suffering of Aboriginal Australians its human cost. But their culture which we have despised as 'godless' may also offer an alternative to ours and different, more 'godly', definitions of 'reality' and 'value'. In Aboriginal culture mind and world are no longer separate. What is 'real' and valuable is not necessarily what can be seen, touched, tasted and measured. They do not live by surfaces. Reality and value for them lie rather in the unexpected, in the distances of the sacred. Space and time, similarly, are open to infinite possibility. Space is not an empty container, to be filled with goods or made to produce them, and time is not linear but the circular time of myth, in which what matters lies at the 'still point of the turning world', the hub of the wheel, the Great Time, the Dreaming in which the stories told in scripture lay down the shape and purpose of our lives. In this view, to return to the point made earlier about the choice between the Greek and the Hebraic world-view, creation is in fact God's work of art, God's poem, and we in our turn, 'such stuff as dreams are made on', stuff, that is to say, in process of shaping and being shaped.

There is no space here to develop the implications of this world view, though the theologian and anthropologist, Eugene Stockton, has written significantly about the contribution Aboriginal culture may have to make: about its generosity, joyfulness, sense of humble dependence, and, above all, its deep sense of prayerful stillness.²¹ In many ways, their culture thus seems closer to the gospel than the culture which calls itself Christian. Perhaps the time has come for the conquering Church to become the humble Church, to yet learn from them and in their place what is concealed from the rich, the wise and the powerful but revealed to the 'little ones'.

True, there is a way to go before this happens. But it is only by passing through the shadow that we may be able to emerge from the shadow. Then, sitting down together in mutual forgiveness, compassion and love, we may emerge into new possibility, begin to discover that state of 'silence, humanity and simplicity' which is the only proper state for Christians as well as for human beings generally.

NOTES

¹ Chryssavgis, John: 'Patristic Christology: through the looking glass of the heretics', *Pacifica* 3, 2 (June, 1990), p 187.

² Ricoeur, Paul: *The symbol of evil* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969), p 93.

³ JanMohamed, Abdul: 'The economy of Manichean allegory: the function of racial difference in colonialist literature', in Gates, Henry Louis (ed): *Race, Writing and difference* (London, Chicago University Press, 1986), pp 78-106.

⁴ Mellick, S. (ed): *The portable Henry Kingsley* (Brisbane, Queensland University Press, 1982), pp 134-5.

⁵ Arendt, Hannah: *On revolution* (London, Penguin, 1973), p 190.

⁶ Hope, A. D.: 'Australia', in Heseltine, H. P. (ed): *The Penguin book of Australian verse* (Melbourne, Penguin, 1979), p 190.

⁷ Schillebeeckx: *Christ: the Christian experience in the modern world* (London, SCM Press, 1982), p 33.

⁸ Faur, José: 'God as a writer: omnipresence and the art of dissimulation', in *Religion and intellectual life* VI, 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1989), p 36.

⁹ Ricoeur, Paul: *The conflict of interpretations* (Evanston, North Western University, 1974), p 445.

¹⁰ Chisholm, A. R. and Quinn, J. J. (eds): *The prose of Christopher Brennan* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1965), p 45.

¹¹ Wilding, Michael (ed): *The portable Marcus Clarke* (Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1976), p 417.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hart, Kevin: *The trespass of the sign* (Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 47.

¹⁴ Jüngel, Eberhard: *God as the mystery of the world* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Erdmans, 1979), p 159.

¹⁵ JanMohamed, Abdul: 'The economy of Manichean allegory', p 84.

¹⁶ *Ezekiel* 37.

¹⁷ Boake, Barcroft: 'Where the dead men lie', in Heseltine, H. P. (ed): *The Penguin book of Australian verse* (Melbourne, Penguin, 1976), pp 92-4.

¹⁸ *Isaiah* 53.

¹⁹ Moltmann, Jürgen: *The Church in the power of the Spirit* (London, SCM Press, 1985), p 88.

²⁰ Stow, Randolph: *To the islands* (Melbourne, Penguin, 1974), p 128.

²¹ Stockton, Eugene: 'Sacred story—sacred land', *Compass*, 1/25 (1990), pp 5-14.