

SPIRITUALITY: AN AUSTRALIAN ACCENT¹

By TONY KELLY

MANY OF US AND OF THOSE who know us well would savour a certain irony in the phrase, 'Australian spirituality': *coincidentia oppositorum* and all that! So, there is no need to take ourselves *too* seriously. After all, we are hardly the repositories of the world's wisdom; nor, indeed, the home of one of the world's classic cultures, the way Europe, India, China, perhaps even North America, might prove to be.

On the other hand, the emerging global reality would not be attractive if it were populated by a form of standardized humanity detached from any history, as the outcome of the conformities of modern technological culture. After all, we do know something about ecology today; and that includes the ecology of human culture. We are quite justified in being conservationist in regard to all cultural varieties of the human. Only in that way can each culture offer to the wider world its unique witness.

For there is a uniqueness in living on this continent. Here, Easter is in autumn and Christmas is in summer, and the south wind blows cold. Here, our two centuries of European occupation, with all their inauspicious and tragic beginnings, are being awkwardly confronted by the uncounted millennia of Aboriginal pre-history. And now, like it or not, we are increasingly in contact with the ancient worlds of Asia.

Hence, 'Down Under' experience has its own point of view. For we are engaged not so much in the work of excavating the past, but in imagining a possible future. Our rather singular little history is going forward into a new stage, perhaps to fizzle as an experiment that failed, perhaps to die into something more wonderful and more healing than what we have known.

More to the point, any distinctive spirituality will be born out of the simple fact that we are *here*. For most of us, for most of the time, it is as Australians that we relate to our neighbour, understand ourselves, interpret our world and assume our responsibilities. Similarly, it is as Australians we confess whatever faith we have and experience in our hearts the judgement of God. Our land with all its

beauty, bounty and menace, gives our souls symbols for prayer. In short, it is here that we find the presence of grace, or drift further toward an antipodean hell.

1. *The withheld self*

D. H. Lawrence observed decades ago, in his 'Kangaroo', the 'withheld self' typical of our culture. There is an odd extroversion in our social communication. Our fixations on sporting excellence, the grotesque stunted character of our political discourse, are some indication. James McAuley linked this sense of self to the landscape, with 'the faint sterility that disheartens and derides',

Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,
A futile heart within a fair periphery;
The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them,
The men are independent but you could not call them free.²

The very fact that poets express such judgements means that there is a resistant force at work. Evidence of an other self appears so often in our poetry,³ in the novels (and other utterances) of Patrick White and David Malouf, in the stark forms of so much of our painting (Nolan, Pugh, Boyd, Drysdale, Williams), in the evocative music of Sculthorpe and Anthill, in the piercing satire of many of our cartoonists. For Australians to recognize the problem does not mean indulging in some national form of self-hatred—an enduring example of which is Barry Humphry's brilliant creation, Dame Edna of Moonee Ponds. Spirituality is something more positive and courageous. It aims at the identification of truncated and disowned versions of the human self, thereby to open the way to something more.

In this context, spirituality is based in a fundamental principle: the transcendent is most meaningfully explored as the fulfilment and the affirmation of 'the true self', in all its individual, social, global and cosmic dimensions. The neglect of such a principle has caused 'God in Australia' to be so often presented as a foreign and abstract reality, and the 'Australian self' to be mutilated or disowned.

2. *Spirituality and conversation*

The reality of conversation—not so solemn or official as 'dialogue'—has deep consequences in exploring spirituality. Here, I can only ask the reader to ponder on the comparatively rare moments when true conversation has occurred—often enough over a good

meal! Somehow a space is opened to the mysteriousness of life's meaning. It allows us all to be bumbling amateurs. No authority is allowed to stop the conversation. There is no further purpose either, save to enjoy the playful (this can be deeply serious) quest for 'what it's all about'. For it allows for the jumble of experience and questioning in which our explicit beliefs are framed and tested.

Especially here in Australia. The depth of Australian conversation is more marked by silence than verbal play. Certainly, in regard to the spiritual, there is an habitual reserve, a kind of inarticulateness in regard to the big things of life. Our antipodean isolation, the brutality of our historical origins as a 'cesspool . . . the dregs of the offscourings of all mankind' (Bishop Ullathorne), a general sense of something new struggling for expression in the harsh, raw world of Down Under, offer some explanation. What Australians were about, looked like 'no-thing' compared to older habits of thought and expression. Australia had entered into a kind of cultural 'cloud of unknowing', its own *via negativa*, in which the cultured thinking of the old countries had to be denied before the new reality could be expressed.

The struggle and degradation of our past, to say nothing of the dust and distance and heat, somehow parched our spirits, and made us wary of anything seeming too lush and soulful. It is as though anything truly significant, anything ultimately meaningful, cannot be a fitting matter for conversation. It leads to an embarrassed silence. Besides, if the sun is shining and the barbecue is sizzling, if the beer is cool and waves are thumping down there in the surf as the radio drones out its commentary on a test match, and as the tragedies of the wider world seem a long way away, moments of metaphysical reflection are necessarily rare. Bruce Dawe seems to be getting at this strange reticence when he wrote of ' . . . this southern church of silence/ Where to speak what's in the heart is some dishonour'.⁴

Those who would explore Australian spirituality have to take up the challenge to word, reverently and discreetly, 'what's in the heart'. Even the theologically adept, challenged by the realities of Australian culture, feel markedly tongue-tied. The general tone of our public discourse does not usually invite conversation of 'the deeper issues'. This, doubtless, has a lot to do with the lack of any assured place for religion in our public life.

Still, there is something going on below the surface. Reviewing Les Murray's *Anthology* . . . , the poet John Foulcher writes that many of our best writers who would own neither a religious nor a Christian concern are represented:

. . . the book implies that the poet and the theologian can cover the same ground, they just approach it from different angles. I like this approach, as it forces truth to be separated from dogma and self-interest, it returns God to the wordless, and then tries to find words for him.⁵

Returning 'God' to the wordless, to the ineffable, paradoxically creates the space in which a genuine spiritual conversation can take place. This point is tellingly expressed in David Malouf's *The great world*.⁶ He relates how a young academic spoke at the funeral of the kindly Mr Warrender who had established a modest reputation as a poet:

He was speaking of poetry itself, of the hidden part it played in their lives, especially here in Australia, though it was common enough—that was the whole point of it—and of the embarrassment when it had, as now, to be brought into the light. How it spoke up, not always in the plainest terms, since it wasn't always possible, but in precise ones just the same, for what it deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded: all those unique and repeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things, that is our *other* history, the one that goes on, in a quiet way, under the noise and chatter of events and is the major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet, and has been from the beginning. To find words for *that*; to make glow with significance what is usually unseen, and unspoken too—that, when it occurs, is what binds us all, since it speaks out of the centre of each one of us; giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own.

Australian poetry is an extraordinarily spiritual utterance, at least since the Second World War. It subverts the flatness of our usual communication and invites Australians to meet in 'our other history'. Our spirituality cannot afford to ignore such a witness to another kind of conversation.

3. *An inclusive conversation*

Of special importance in the Australian scene is the manner in which our deepest self-awareness is genuinely inclusive of the other. Here, pre-eminently, are 'the battlers', those on the underside of Australian society who have been, in their way, main actors in the strange parable of Australian history.

First, there is the Aboriginal presence with its special character of Dreaming, that 'Ab-Originality' that has seen the land as a sacramental reality through forty thousand years of our pre-Western history. The brutalized consciousness of our early white history saw the Aboriginal inhabitants either as sub-human, or at least as totally irreligious. How White Australia, the unique creation of the dark side of the Enlightenment, would recognize the full humanity of these others was always problematical. Of course, social progress has been made, and the plight of the Aboriginal has at least become a moral problem. But the continuance of this long-suffering and remarkable people is becoming something more: a presence, inviting Australia into a larger sense of history and, indeed, of providence; into a deeper sense of the sacredness of the land, and blessed diversity in humanity itself.

Symbolically allied to the Aboriginal presence is the land itself, so often feared, exploited and degraded. The ring-barked tree of our early history is slowly yielding to an ecological sense of the precious, vulnerable variations of nature on this continent. It is unlikely that Australians will ever feel at home with themselves until they have developed a more tender relationship to the land as the shared body of their existence.

Then there is the astonishing multi-racial or 'multicultural' (the preferred political word) diversity. It poses big questions for all of us to realize that so many races and peoples, and now different religions, have come to this country as the place of hope. But, has all the suffering and oppression and anxiety that drove so many to come here been only for *this*? True, Australian reserve is somewhat justified as a reluctance to risk conflict by opening old wounds; thus preferring to concentrate on a new start After all, the new did happen here: women had the vote here in 1902, thus putting us with New Zealand as the two oldest continuing democracies in the world today!

The point in these examples is that the spiritual is the reality of an expanding, inclusive conversation. It invites us to reach into what was hitherto disowned, forgotten or demeaned, to claim it in a more gracious integrity.

4. *Spirituality and the Spirit*

Here, Lonergan's words are apt:

It is as though a room was filled with music though one can have no sure knowledge of its source. There is in the world, as it were, a

charged field of love and meaning; here and there it reaches a notable intensity: but it is ever unobtrusive, hidden, inviting us to join. And join we must if we are to perceive it, for our perceiving is through our loving.⁷

Where, in the deep questioning of our culture, is this 'charged field of love and meaning' to be found in Australia? The classic resources of the Christian faith are here presumed. Mother Mary McKillop and Caroline Chisholm are great spiritual figures in a religious and moral sense, as are contemporary heroes such as Ma Shirl, the Aboriginal social activist, and medical men, such as 'Weary' Dunlop of Changi fame, Fred Hollows, the eye-specialist, honoured as 'Australian of the Year' for his work both here and in Africa; and the heart specialist, Victor Chang, who was murdered recently. But then there is the special witness of a literary kind: the poet, or someone like a poet, as I implied above, is the one who most gives spiritual utterance down here. Along with remarkable poets as different as Judith Wright and James McAuley, as Les Murray and Kevin Hart, there is the literary vision of Patrick White and of the historian, the late Manning Clark (perhaps the most revered of all academics), the searching theological message of Leunig's cartoons, and striking humanity of Bert Facey recorded in *A fortunate life*.⁸ Expressions of a liberating love and meaning embodied in such figures earth discussion of the spiritual as nothing else can. Spirituality is, first of all, awareness of the Spirit at work.

5. *The social experience of God*

Here, in arguably the most secular country ever to come into existence, 'God was dead' long before other cultures made this obscene discovery. In contrast to, say, 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' of the North American aspiration, Australians have settled for a more 'live and let live' approach; simply to live, to be, is the more prosaic, perhaps more realistic, goal. Consequently, for Australians, faith is a function of individuality, underscoring the right to live somewhat 'outside the system', even in opposition to it. There are deep historical antipathies to the public religion that sanctioned the monstrosities of Norfolk Island and provoked the bitterness of sectarianism.

Here the danger is individualism of an extreme kind. Given the Christian resources of our country, spirituality must learn to emphasize that the experience of God is pre-eminently a social experience.⁹ The divine is the indefinable mystery in which we all belong,

connecting us with one another in mutual responsibility. Thus, the Holy Spirit is the shared breath of our common humanity. Christ is the divine expression of compassionate humanness. The Father is the mystery in which we all come home. In such classic expressions of Christian faith, the social and cosmic dimensions await a larger imagination. Isolated individualism is, in Christian terms, the practical expression of atheism. That takes me to the next point.

6. *The social experience of the cross*

Spirituality is traditionally associated with a devotion to the passion and death of Christ. To prevent this becoming a sort of disengaged, individualistic dolorism, the social and cultural relevance of being united to the sufferings of Christ needs to be stressed. Spirituality here, as everywhere, has to confront the 'heart of darkness' present in the distinctive cultural situation: the obscenity of the cross continues to be an historical reality laden with all the deadly, frustrating power of the problem of evil.

In the Australian context, spirituality has to touch many points of resistant darkness where no light seems to shine. Here are three contemporary examples:

Our classical failure bears on our treatment of the Aborigines. The dominant culture, despite devoting huge material resources to 'the problem', simply does not seem to have the resources within itself to bring about the healing and reconciliation demanded. White and black are each, in different ways, enclosed in the same defeat. The grand economic or political solution has not worked. What will? Only a healing, merciful grace, it seems. Spirituality here has to learn to wait at that point, and form some new imagination of the world 'otherwise'.

Then there is the typical problem of the 80s, achieving notable proportions here as the decade of greed. The lionizing of the millionaire entrepreneurs has yielded to disgust at the way we were conned. Royal Commissions have fed us with the revelations of corruption at every level of government, the judiciary, law-enforcement, financial institutions, political parties and trade unions, to say nothing of the 'rorrts' in health care by doctors and patients alike. The result has been somewhat devastating in the self-image of Australian society. How we are to pick up the pieces and get beyond corrosive cynicism has become an urgent practical question. Our sins have been exposed. What kind of forgiveness, healing and fresh start is possible? Realistic spirituality has to start with a humble

confession of sin and an honest appraisal of the disgrace into which we have fallen as a country.

Then, too, somewhat more intimately, the emotional bleakness of so much Australian life has been more deeply investigated. We share, of course, with most of the Western world, the intimate devastation of marital and family breakdown, the brutalization of women, the general sexual confusion in male/female identity. But there is an Australian twist to this in a culture that was so originally wounded by the inevitable 'masculinism' of its origins. Here spirituality means the exploration of a more healing, inclusive human intimacy.

7. *The praxis of hope*

Precisely by touching the points of maximum darkness, spirituality is summoned into the activity of world-forming hope—if it is not to degenerate into a dour, censorious repudiation of its world. All too often have we interpreted Easter faith as a replay of the highlights once our team has won—as though we could 'fast forward' from the impenetrable resistant cross to the victory of resurrection. In contrast, true spirituality shows itself in the tough, hopeful ability to imagine the world 'otherwise'; and in recognizing where such imagination is present.

Australian history is something of a paschal parable itself. Here, there was no dramatic revolution. What happened, rather, was the gradual evolution of a new kind of democratic experiment. Our past, and even a good deal of our present, is peopled by the rejects, the casualties, the displaced, the victims of other lands. Somehow it is our shared conviction that here things could be different. The wonder is that, fundamentally, they are. Despite endemic economic problems, there is still a sense of space, of life lived in another key, of a possible future where all kinds of ancient enmities can be dissolved. There are certain kinds of racial and social violence that are beyond the pale. Even if any form of smug self-congratulation is not desirable, genuine thankfulness for a surprising grace is.

Through it all, and I cannot separate this from hope, is our humour. Our cartoonists, such as Michael Leunig, are often our best philosophers. Les Murray wrote,

The ability to laugh at venerated things, and at awesome and deadly things, . . . may in time prove to be one of Australia's greatest gifts to mankind. It is at bottom a spiritual laughter, a mirth that puts tragedy, futility and vanity back in their place. It was one of the things that led me back to Christianity.¹⁰

Here, even the most solemn discourse is likely to be interrupted by the manic laughter of the kookaburra—a symbol in itself.

8. *Ecclesial spirituality*

Here it is a matter of entering into the sacramental and dialogical consciousness of the Church and embodying in oneself the reality of 'The Church in the Modern World'. Each of us, and each Christian community, is, when all is said and done, that part of the world that is conscious of the universal mystery at work in all lives, and through all creation.

Such a change in ecclesial imagination has considerable significance in Australia. Emblematic of this new awareness is the Catholic Bishops' *Common weath and common good*, a statement on wealth distribution in this country. Its method and its content point to a new sense of the Church in the social life of this country. Methodologically, it is the outcome of some years of public consultation with representatives drawn from all segments of Australian society. In terms of content, it touches on a most incendiary national issue. In both these respects, it indicates the effort of the Church to define itself into the public conversation of the country, not by speaking from a point outside or above it. Again, to cite Les Murray, it represents an awareness of a peculiarly Australian symbol, 'The Common Dish':

. . . that vessel of common human sufferings, joys, disappointments, tragedies and bare sufficiencies from which most people have to eat in this world, and from which some choose to eat in order to keep faith with them. This dish is the opposite to the medieval Grail, which was a vessel attained only by a spiritual elite. To refuse the common ration, or to fail at least to recognise and respect it, earns one the contempt and rejection of battlers and all who have lived under the laws of necessity. It is a harsher vessel than the Christian chalice, and not identical with it, except perhaps for the saints, but I believe it lies close to the heart of Australian consciousness, and can never be safely ignored. It is the fountainhead of much of the conformity so often deplored in our society, and much of the art of living in Australia consists in judging, continually and possibly gracefully, just what distance we may wander from the common table and how often to come back.¹¹

Perhaps that is what is hidden in our myths of 'mateship', our pride in the attitude of 'live and let live', our sympathy for the underdog, the way the symbols of Gallipoli and Eureka are valued in our history. Australians have their experience of the truly human

when we live in solidarity with the suffering. It inspires no theory about our common humanity, but more a conversation around 'a common dish', in which those who suffer have the best stories to tell.

9. *Transformation*

Spirituality is ultimately intent on the positive grace and current of life's direction. To some degree, it finds itself in reaction to a previous theological moralism, which tended to address conscience before introducing the larger experience of religious and Christian existence.

Such an emphasis has particular relevance to the Australian scene. A more spiritual communication will enable a salutary moral communication to take place, without the suspicion of 'wowserism'—that style of censorious moralism which is detached from any gracious world view, and which reveals itself as unsympathetic to the struggles of living human beings. We are going through a new experience of pluralism, occasioned by a considerable Asian and non-European component in the Australian population. In such a context, spirituality is not the soft option away from traditional moralities, but the effort to explore the meaning of the humanity we share before assuming the moral high ground. This is especially important given that secular Australia has had its success in bringing forth a democratic and generally decent society. Not to recognize that feature of our human co-existence is to appear foreign and intrusive. Hence, Australian spirituality must explore the roots of our egalitarianism, to maintain it, and where necessary, as in the case of the Bishops' intervention, to redeem it.

So nine brief points, no doubt with parallels in many other cultures and countries. But the Australian experience is what it is: at once a search for the centre where the true self is to be found, and an opening to the circumference to include others in whatever self-definition we arrive at. Unlike the classic spiritualities of other countries, our spiritual quest is very much 'in progress', found more in the question than the answer, more in the conversation than the statement, more in the silence than the word, more in the poetry than the philosophy, more 'in the little sacraments of daily existence' than in the theological system.

No doubt 'The South Land of the Holy Spirit' of the old mapmakers (*Terra Australis de Spiritu Sancto*) will slowly make its own discoveries for the good of all.

NOTES

- ¹ For a fuller treatment, Tony Kelly, CSsR, *A new imagining. Towards an Australian spirituality*, Collins Dove, Melbourne, 1990.
- ² James McAuley, 'Envoi', *Selected poems* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967), p 3.
- ³ See Les Murray, *An anthology of Australian religious poetry*, (Collins Dove, Melbourne, 1989).
- ⁴ From the poem 'At Mass', cited in Peter Kirkwood, 'Two Australian poets as theologians: Les Murray and Bruce Dawe', in *Discovering an Australian theology*, ed Peter Malone (Homebush, 1988), p 195.
- ⁵ John Foulcher quoted by Les Murray in *Embodiment and incarnation: notes on preparing an anthology of Australian religious verse* (Aquinas Library, Brisbane, 1987), p 12.
- ⁶ Chatto and Windus (London, 1990), pp 283f.
- ⁷ *Method in theology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1972), p 290.
- ⁸ Bert Facey, *A fortunate life*, (Penguin, Melbourne, 1988).
- ⁹ See my *Trinity as love. A theology of the Christian God* (Michael Glazier, Wilmington, Del., 1989), especially the concluding chapters.
- ¹⁰ Les Murray, 'Some religious stuff I know about Australia', in Dorothy Harris, Douglas Hind, David Millikan (eds), *The shape of belief* (Lancer, Homebush, 1981), p 13-28.
- ¹¹ Les Murray, 'Some religious stuff I know about Australia', p 25.