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Environmental Spirituality

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It is difficult to address the crises of ecology and relevance in religion where the culture is increasingly secular, disbelieving, and unable to ground itself in local experience. This paper proposes that church leaders have the opportunity to change perspective from one that is "other-worldly" to one which focuses on the environment as earth-based, sacred, and which ultimately requires our respect. Indigenous Australians led the way in this regard. Only by making the world sacred, by turning the earth into creation, can we approach the problem of the environmental crisis and work toward repair.

Many people today claim that religion is irrelevant. Secularism has made such an impact that it is hard for religion to reassert its authority in the old ways. In several books, I have tried to argue that the religious outlook remains important for our personal and social wellbeing and mental health (Tacey, 1995, 2000, 2003). However, another way for religion to insist on its relevance in a secular society is by showing leadership in the debate about the ecological crisis. The crisis occurs because human beings do not care enough about the environment, and mistreat it as a resource for human exploitation. How do we get humanity to care more about the physical world? I don't think secularism or humanism can win this battle, merely by appealing to people's guilty conscience about their impact on the environment. I think only religion can provide the answer in this regard: by showing that the world is sacred, and, as such, worthy of our respect, concern and love. Only by making the world sacred, by turning the earth into creation, can we approach the problem of the environmental crisis and work toward repair. But here lies the rub, because Christianity has been historically ambivalent about the natural world, and has often contrasted earth-worship and paganism with its own transcendental message. How does Christianity face this challenge today, and can it show leadership in the most important task of our time: to protect the earth from ruin?

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 (1995) has even referred to certain excesses of our Judeo-Christian inheritance as heavenism. Our religious sights were firmly upward, toward heaven, the future, the afterlife 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 white fellows 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.

We need to develop a spirituality of creation, to remind ourselves that creation is sacred, since 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

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increased sense of cosmic spirituality. Already we have witnessed several important books which have argued that a new spirituality in Australia will need to be earth-based and creational, including works by Catherine Hammond (1991), Paul Collins (1995), 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 otherworldly 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 literary 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, p. x)

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 this country we see church buildings up for sale. 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, and 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 (1984) has written, "God in Australia is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape" (p. 116), perhaps God is not altogether at home in our sacred dwellings or practices.

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 transcendental 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 pantheism, 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 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 Catholic tradition, we have 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. Pope John Paul II nominated St Francis as the patron saint of world ecology, in a creative attempt to show the relevance of religion to contemporary concerns. 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.

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 inquiry, 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 could not be recognised because he did not wear a European face. But as Norman Habel (1999) has correctly surmised, the first question facing theology in Australia ought to be: "What was God doing in Australia before the white people arrived?" (p. 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.

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 (Rudd, 2008) 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 justice. 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 would be 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, due to 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 (1995) has argued, Aboriginal people are extending the gift of belonging, but we don't yet know how to receive their gift. 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.

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