Cross-cultural sharing of spirituality

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the nature of the Australian Aborigine and Christian spirituality. It demonstrates that the indigenous spirituality shows a strong tie between the spiritual realm and life's journey. The cultural symbolism, which reflects cosmology, shows that the mystical nature of the spiritual journey is deeply immersed in the totality of the Aboriginal life and consciousness. The study recognizes that the Aboriginal and Christian worldviews are distinctly different. However, it argues that the Aboriginal Christian spirituality may be enhanced by the qualities imbedded in its indigenous roots. The study demonstrates that, at the point where propositional creed-based structure of the Christian faith creates a spiritual vacuum, the indigenous spirituality provides a natural bridge for spiritual healing and emotional stability. Further, the experiential and participative involvement in rites restores a sense of identity, security and purpose. Finally, it suggests that the development of spirituality in the indigenous Christian context includes aspects of cultural continuity, as well as the challenge of transformational adjustment to new experiences.

1 THE HEART OF ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY

The Australian Aboriginal spirituality is grounded in various mythologies, ceremonies, values and customs. The most ardent aspect of the Aboriginal spirituality is the interconnectedness between the mystical world of dreaming and the aesthetic experiences. It finds its expression in art, music, dance, ceremonies and stories. The cultural symbolism, which reflects cosmology, sociality and notions of a person, means that the mystical nature of the spiritual journey is continually relived by its reliance on the dreaming sites as a source of energy. Such a journey may be defined as a participatory involvement in mystical realities.

To explore the depth of the Aboriginal spirituality and to show how different cultural practices and beliefs integrate into life's experience, this paper intends to discuss four distinct elements of the indigenous worldview. a) Spirits are natural to the world; b) Life's journey is historically continuous with the Dreaming; c) Totemism; d) Relationship to the land.

Spirits are natural to the world

In contrast to the Western worldview, the Australian Aborigines' culture unfolds a close tie between the physical world and the supernatural realm of the spirits. The mythologies infuse into the landscape a spiritual dimension - the spirits of its ancestor. As such, the rocks maintain ongoing relevance, creative power and energy (Breeden, 1991). Melva and Roberts (1991, p.11) suggests that an Aborigine moves through life "with the supreme confidence that he is surrounded by spiritual beings who established the world." Hence, his life is not isolated from the spiritual dimension as it is closely linked with the world of the spirits. The integrated rhythms of the spiritual realm weave through the flow of life bridging, not only the gap between natural and

supernatural, but between the past and present. For example, the energy that created the earth resonates in "the shapes and energies that bathe the earth and all the life processes" (Lawlor, 1991). The mythology of the Rainbow Serpent unfolds the picture of this close tie and synergy. It claims that the creative energies are reflected in the colours of the Rainbow Serpent. The Serpent's attraction to the women's menstrual blood releases energy. During cultural fertility dances, the emanating energy is attracted to the colours of the paint on the dancers bodies increasing the capacity of human fertility. Lawlor (1991b, p.334) describes this close intimacy between the spirits and human beings as follows. "Just as the body drinks the nourishing energy of blood to maintain itself, so too the blood drinks subtle energies from the spirit world in order to maintain the nourishing communication between them."

The interplay of mythological themes unfolds human need for an intimate connection with the spiritual dimension of life. Thompson refers to it as "the universal human capacity to receive, reflect and respond." I add, as well as, to embrace the totality of life's experience including thinking, lifestyle and relationships (Thompson, 1995, p.7). The depth of such spirituality means to discover one's innate potential and a foundation for the formation and nurture of a secure identity.

Life today is historically continuous with the Dreaming

Central to the Australian Aboriginal beliefs is the concept of Dreaming. It shapes the indigenous identity by merging the past story of how the universe began with life's ongoing journey.The Dreaming empowers every aspect of the Aboriginal life such as work, artistry, relationships, worship and rituals. Here, the past is reproduced and moulded into an ongoing rhythm of daily functions. Quoting Stanner, Tripcony (1999, p. 9) describes Dreaming as a process that cannot be fixed in time. "It was and is everywhere". As the mythology maintains, it was the time when the ancestor spirits prescribed the Aboriginal way of life. The depth of this interconnectedness with cosmology is well expressed by Lawlor (1991c, p.46) who states that, "Aborigines attribute consciousness to the creative forces and everything in the creation." However, Aboriginal cosmology is seen as more than a historical act of the past retained in a story. In other words, it is more than a distant memory. It is believed that the spirit ancestors infused themselves into the landscapes to remain there for all time. In doing so, they became an integral part of the land and nature and the present time (Breeden, 1991, p.23-24; Tunbridge, 1988, p.30).

Myers (1991, p.53) suggest that, through re-enactment, the Dreaming changes experience so that it "appears to be continuous and permanent." This is accomplished through paintings, songs, dances and other rituals. Participation in the re-enactment enables individuals to identify with the actual reality of the story. Hence, it may be concluded that to the Aboriginal mindset the oral story is more than verbal expression of the past event; rather the re-enactment involves participation in the very reality of the event (Layton, 1986. p.3; Tunbridge, 1988. p.31). Further, Dreaming energizes the sense of indigenous identity linking it with the story of the grand cosmic copulation and the image of the primal couple. The creative process of the story is relived and experienced in ecstatic dances and stories that provide guidelines for social relationships, customs and rituals. Here, the indigenous consciousness is immersed in the totality of an ongoing experience. Breeden (1991, p.24) refers to Dreamtime as a "cohesive force that weaves all life and all parts of the environment into a single fabric."

Totemism

The existing cohesiveness between nature, man, and Dreamtime ancestors enhance the character of Aboriginal identity. Totemism adds strength to this invisible web of interconnected life (Lawlor, 1991, 279). Totemism creates communities and at the same time, the closely knitted lines of identification provide boundaries for relational interaction within the social fabric. The Aboriginal tribes divide into small clans. Each clan identifies with a totemic insignia attached to an animal or objects in nature. They govern the land, as it is a sanctuary for the spirit of the totemic species. In response, they receive power from the life force deriving from the spirits present in the area.

It may be concluded that totemic web plays a significant role in shaping the spiritual realm of the indigenous identity. It is believed that totem spirits invest people with ancestral soul that en-

ters a woman during conception. Totems such as kangaroo, emu, flying foxes and fig trees among many continue to maintain an ongoing spiritual life essence of the Dreaming. As Breeden (Breeden, 1991. p. 23) expressed, "some of the life essence of the Dreaming species resides in person and has the potential to change him or her into the Dreaming animal or plant." However, the power, does not only reside in a person but the actual totemic symbols painted at the sacred sites. Therefore, the spiritual perspective of the totemic symbols extends beyond the geographical boundaries associated with the totem for the place may be symbolically linked with another form such as dance. Although the member of the tribe may be away, the dance ritual connects the individual or a group with the spirit of the place.

Secondly, beside the totemic identity based on the group relationship to the land, regions and animal powers, individuals within the clans (Moieties) derive their identity from the parental heritage attached to a second totemic identity (Lawlor, 1991, p.283). It distinguishes the family members within a given clan. During celebrations and other functions, people sit within their moieties groups. Although each clan has a distinct identity, yet, this integrated network system, governed by laws, functions at a high level of caring responsibility to the environment and individuals. Thus, no one owns anything either in possession or the living creatures of the land. For example, when hunting a man from an Emu clan may not touch an emu. However, if in the company of another clan, he is allowed to kill the animal and offer it to the hunter of the other clan. It may be said that totemism in the Aboriginal system of beliefs functions as a supportive network and caring responsibility to others. The association with a totem establishes a strong sense of individual and community identity. Hence, it creates a sense of security and belonging. In that sense, the Aboriginal identity weaves deeply into the fabrics of the spiritual realm and finds its anchor in the tribal community.

Relationship to the land

Aboriginal people see land as an object of "reverence and of responsibility" (Brady, 1994, p.61). The landscape with all its symbolic contours and holy sites does not only tell the story, but it is the story. The mystical imprints of the ancestral consciousness transform into a visible reality reinforcing the fact that the creative forces are present and alive. As spoken by an Aboriginal woman "With your vision you see me sitting on the rock, but I am sitting on the body of my ancestor. The earth, his body, and my body are identical" (Lawlor, 1991, p.42). All the sites associated with creative events are immortalized in stories and songs. The land is alive, and its spirit connects with the spirit of all things on this planet. In response, man has the responsibility to be an active custodian of the land. This responsibility means more than managing the environment in a physical sense. Rather, it includes a spiritual responsibility on a deeply personal and communal level. This deep spiritual interconnectedness with the land invests Aboriginal people with personal identity, provides security and regulates lives through rites and ceremonies. Also, it empowers them with moral obligation to each other. Furthermore, the deep interconnectedness with nature and the spirits of its ancestors enhances the Aboriginal aesthetic experience expressed in song, poetry, dance and visual arts. Brady (1994, p.62) suggests that concern for land with its spiritual dimension "identifies with their (Aboriginal) continual life as people."

Space limits the scope of an in-depth analysis of the Aboriginal life and practices. Suffice to say the succinct overview shows close integration between spirituality and life's journey among the Australian Aborigines. Here, life is not distinct from the spiritual world but is embedded in it. Its contemplative nature finds expression in art, music, science, dance and varied ceremonies. In consequence, the cultural symbolism that reflects cosmology means that the mystical nature of the spiritual realm is reproduced and deeply ingrained in the totality of life's journey. In view of the holistic nature of the indigenous spirituality, this paper proposes a number of characteristics as a foundation for the formation of the Aboriginal Christian spirituality. These are as follows:

a. Interconnectedness with the spiritual realm
b. Holistic view of life with no distinction between secular and spiritual
c. View of time as an 'ongoing present' experience
d. Aesthetic expressiveness to relive the past story through song, poetry, dance and rites.
e. Personal and communal identity linked with cosmology

f. Responsibility to the land and to the community

2 THE CONTRAST BETWEEN ABORIGINAL AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

This research argues that the development of the Aboriginal Christian spirituality may be enhanced by the qualities imbedded in its indigenous heritage. Melva and Roberts (1975, p.11) suggest a connection between a number of Old Testament narratives and the Dreamtime mythologies. Furthermore, they propose that some Dreamtime legends teach similar moral values that are found in the Old Testament oracles. There is no doubt that such similarities are plausible and may suggest a link with the creation roots common to all mankind (Genesis 1:27). However, one needs to recognize that the Aboriginal and Christian worldviews are incompatible for the following reasons.

a. The Aboriginal religion is not familiar with the divine love of the Supreme God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ.
b. The concept of a personal God who suffered and died out of love for unworthy people is absent from Aboriginal beliefs.
c. The Christian concept of forgiveness is replaced by obedience to tribal law.
d. Human life is subjected to the moods of either happy or angry gods.
e. The belief in a universal God contrasts with the ancestral spirits who instigate tribal tradition.
f. Rather than a response of gratitude, rituals are designed to express adoration or achieve propitiation of mysterious entities.
g. The creation story is replaced by the Dreaming mythologies.
h. There is no awareness of sin, human brokenness or need of a Saviour.

The highlighted differences point to two distinctively divergent religious beliefs and as such to two concepts of spirituality. Aboriginal spirituality may be defined as participatory engagement in mystical realities. It preserves cultural values and nurtures people's identity with the framework of cultic and mythical practices. On the other hand, Christian spirituality involves a response to God's self-revelation (Hebrews 1:1-3). In contrast to the Aboriginal dreaming and mythologies, the Christian faith regards the authority of Scripture "as a channel through which God's self-revelation in Jesus is encountered". This revelation affirms "the centrality and sovereignty of Jesus Christ in all matter of faith and life"(McGrath 1996, p.54). Here, identity links with the discovery of one's uniqueness and value. Further, the journey of knowing God shapes the pathway of relational intimacy that weaves into every facet of life's experience (John 17:3). In consequence, it may be defined as a process of "opening to a deeper way of living with God" (Campbell & Dreitcer, 2001, p.7).

However, the strongly cognitive and definable expressions of Christian faith tend to create a spiritual myopia towards "anything from outside the Christian heritage to become a norm for what is truly Christian" (McGrath 1996). This point may be illustrated by the attitude adopted by the European settlers towards Australian Aborigine natives. They were perceived as "primitive, atheistic, pagan, immoral wretches who required saving" (Tripcony 2002, p.9). In the spirit of cultural ethnocentrism, schools were established to Christianize the Aborigines without any attempts of learning how to express genuine Christianity in sociocultural appropriate ways (Kraft 1996, p.376). The cognitively propositional methodology of Christianizing the indigenous natives contributed to a transitional shift in the nature of Aboriginal Christian spirituality. The highly holistic and experiential nature of the indigenous spirituality succumbed to the propositional and definable tenets of the Christian worldview. However, the strong ethnocentric myopia has abated to understand the depth of the Aboriginal spirituality in terms of its cultural practices and its entire worldview (Charlesworth, 1992). This attitude has been precipitated by the reposition from a creed-based to a spirituality-based identity (Grenz, 1993, p.37).

In spite of the noted differences, this study suggests that the indigenous Christian community may benefit from the spiritual elements entrenched in its cultural heritage such as, interconnectedness with the spiritual realm, holistic view of life's experience, time as the ongoing, present, aesthetic expressiveness, identity with land and a sense of community.

3 SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

The purpose of the proposed framework is to build on the already established foundations of the Aboriginal spirituality. The Christian view of spiritual formation involves a dynamic lifetime experience of knowing God (John 17:3). It occurs during the person's interaction with life, with all its challenges, and the growing relational trust in God's presence. On one hand, the journey includes challenges, starts and stops, variety, humdrum, surprises and moments of inspirational surprises. On the other hand, it includes the struggle to understand God's presence, guidance and care. Even more, it includes frustrations, disappointments, anger, denials, emotional pain, wounds and scars, struggles with the unknown, insecurities, moments when words, definitions and logic give way to despair.

In such emotionally cold and lonely places, people experience what may be referred to as critical meandering. Here, they struggle with the fear of the unknown and attempts to reach over the turbulent torrents of life's ambiguous circumstances searching for someone who cares, someone who offers a temporary home as a place of refreshment and rest. At times, it involves a desperate struggle of faith to be "sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). The existing turbulence creates a tension between human logic to deal with the unexplainable realities of life and a relational trust in God's presence. At times, when the propositional rationale fails to provide adequate answers, the occurring cognitive dissonance contributes to a spiritual derailment. In view of the existing divide, in the Western worldview, between the spiritual and secular domain, this study defines it in terms of a gradual shift towards the secular orientation and a move away from what Houston (Houston, 1984, p. 1046) defines as "the state of deep relationship with God."

At this point, the indigenous spirituality provides a foundational base for the spiritual development of the Christian indigenous life. Firstly, the culturally ingrained connection between the spiritual realm and the physical world provides a natural bridge for spiritual healing and emotional stability. Secondly, the experiential realm of the indigenous spirituality breaks through the barriers of the dichotomy, caused by the propositional creed-based framework, to offer a participative engagement in rites and ceremonies – reminders of the stories that restore a sense of identity, security and purpose. I suggest the following cultural customs and rites enhance the development of the indigenous Christian spirituality.

Firstly, due to the strong character of tribal and clan affiliation, spiritual formation should take place in the safe-haven of communal activities. As pointed out previously even thought clans and individuals carry a distinct tribal identity the integrated communal network function at a high level of caring responsibility. In this context, celebration of significant life events should be occasioned as highlights for the entire community. Events such as baptisms, dedication of children, special events in the life of individual members or families, such as birth of children and other occasions should be part of an ongoing celebration of life and God. Such celebrations enhance a sense of personal security, stimulate a sense of belonging and reaffirm the bond of attachment to God. Further, events such as Christmas, Easter and others should blend with the joy of celebrating God's creative and redemptive involvement in human history. However, the depth of the indigenous interconnectedness with cosmology predisposes it to see these events as more than historical reminders of the past. Rather, God's involvement is infused into the framework of time as an ongoing reality. In that sense, the indigenous spirituality enhances the perspective of the Christian hope in the future restoration (Revelation 22:1-4). However, the indigenous Dreamtime transforms the element of expectation into a current, secure and permanent part of the spiritual journey. In other words, the promise of eternal life is not a distant, wishful thinking but part of the dream weaved into the totality of an ongoing experience (John 3:36). In the framework of its cultural heritage and the Christian worldview, the vibrancy of the interacting community learns how to discern God's ongoing presence in life.

Secondly, commemoration of memorable encounters with God may be affectively remembered and nurtured by the ceremony of Tarlow practiced by the natives of North Western Australia. Tarlow is a stone or a pile of stones set apart as a place dedicated to the ceremony that certain things would multiply and increase (Whitnell, 1901, p.2). To commemorate such unique encounters with God individuals could set up Tarlows signs as a reminder of the trustworthiness of God's promises (2 Peter 1:3,4). From time to time, individual should be encouraged to visit

the places or sites of the sacred aha moments to remind them of the ongoing relational connectedness with God (Genesis 12:7,8; 13:3,4).

Thirdly, rituals are the key part of Aboriginal life. Through rituals, they maintain an ongoing connection with the supernatural. In the Christian context, rituals tend to become part of a habitually performed tradition without a high level of spiritual meaning. On the other hand, Aboriginal celebrations are participative, evoking a strong sense of meaning attached to each rite. Participation in the re-enactment enables individuals to relive the reality of each event, as it becomes part of the ongoing experience. As noted by Grenz (1993, p.45) "Christianity is not merely intellectual assent to a set of doctrines" rather "it encompasses affections, the inner core of one's being". To create a realistic impact, which translates into a meaningful heart-oriented experience, celebration of rituals should involve active participation through music, singing, dance, oral stories and visual arts. The creative engagement energizes the sense of indigenous personal identity, and it immerses individuals in the totality of the ongoing experiences. More so, it takes them beyond an intellectual discernment of Christianity to a place of heart response.

Fourthly, Aboriginal beliefs follow the pattern of oral tradition expressed as a story rather than cognitive propositional constructs. The Aboriginal mindset is predisposed to think in terms of spiritual stories. Therefore, it easily connects with life's oral stories and the story of God's redemptive work. However, as noted by Kraft, the western forms of Christianity eroded the essence of contextualization that allows indigenous groups to understand what it means to be a Christian in their cultural context (Kraft, 1996, p.377). Contextualization allows them to adopt the meaning of a personal attachment to God in the climate of the surrounding cultural needs and functions. In this setting, they need to recapture the pictures of God's self-revelation, the God who appears as the Great Artistic Creator of all Life; God who communicates and who is sensitive to human suffering; God who provides and One who enters into a relationship with people. On this journey, spiritual formation involves a progressive understanding of God. From the Christian perspective, it involves more than a repetitious performance of ritualistic activities associated with mythical legends. It includes an experiential discovery of what it means to grow in "gratitude, trust, obedience, humility, compassion, service and joy" (Thompson, 1995, p.7). This transformational nature of the journey integrates with every aspect of life's journey and casts a sense of new purpose. Mulholland (1993, p.12) defines it as a process of "being conformed into the image of Christ for the sake of others." In the spiritual realm of God's love, there is no race or class distinction. People of all cultures have the same ancestral roots and the same purpose, namely to know God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3; Galatians 3:26-29).

4 CONCLUSION

This paper explored the nature of the Australian Aborigine and Christian spirituality. The succinct survey of the indigenous culture demonstrated close integration between spirituality and life's journey among the Australian Aborigines. It defined the holistic nature of the indigenous spirituality as a participatory and experiential engagement in mystical realities. Further, the study argued that the development of the Aboriginal Christian spirituality may be enhanced by the qualities embedded in the indigenous spirituality. Although, the Aboriginal and Christian spiritualities are exclusively different, the research demonstrated that an open, unprejudiced dialogue unfolded a pathway of commonality. Here, the process of spiritual development for the Aboriginal Christians includes aspects of cultural continuity, as well as, the challenge of transitional adjustment to new experiences.

Firstly, the cultural continuity reminds Aboriginal Christians of the necessity to retain focus on the holistic nature of its cultural worldview. With no distinction between secular and spiritual realm, the indigenous consciousness is immersed in the totality of the spiritual journey. This stance safeguards them from the dangers of developing a creed-based identity defined only by conceptual terminologies. Further, the participatory engagement in the spiritual realities ignites an awareness of the 'ongoing present experience' that preserves values and nurtures personal and communal identity.

Secondly, the process of transitional adjustment confronts the Aboriginal Christians with the challenge of discovering a new dimension of spiritual engagements in which they learn to adopt the meaning of personal relationship with God in the context of their cultural needs and func-

tions. It does not include a total rejection of the cultural values and practices. Rather, it involves reorientation of how to connect with the reality of the Supreme God and how to develop a journey of ongoing relational interconnectedness and trust in the divine providence. The outlined customs and rites, coined with the elements of Christian faith, enhance the development of Christian spirituality by reviving vibrancy and awareness of God's presence in every aspect of life's journey. This research suggests that the integration between the indigenous and Christian practices result in synergy that enhances the meaning of holistic spirituality. In this experience, Aboriginal Christians learn how to discern God's presence both in personal and communal life.

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