

Spiritual Identity and Culture
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Comments by Fr David Ranson

I have been asked to share a few very brief reflections on the importance of culture to the shaping of our spiritual identity – and particularly how this may present in our own Australian context. That culture shapes religious consciousness is a theme that was at the heart of the 20th century scholar of spirituality, Michel de Certeau. As he wrote,

Experience is always defined in cultural terms, even when it is religious . . . it is in the very cultural situation that [a person's] yearnings and [their] predicament 'take flesh', it is through this medium that [they] find God yet ever seek him, that [they] express [their] faith, that [they carry] on simultaneous experiments in colloquy with God and with [their] actual [fellows] . . . A culture is the language of a spiritual experience . . . [Spiritual experience] is therefore expressed in terms of the experiences, ambitions, fears, sicknesses and greatnesses proper to [people] who are caught up with contemporaries in a world conditioned by a particular kind of exchange and a particular type of consciousness.¹

This recognition of how context shapes religious imagination is something, however, relatively new in our reflection in Australia. Geoffrey Lilburne noted this when he wrote,

Brought to these shores as part of a larger European colonial enterprise, Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant variants has prided itself on being the religion of civilization. And, for most of its recent history, Australia has been so absorbed in its European roots and culture that it has taken little notice of what is here, in this place and among these people. We have allowed ourselves to be co-opted into some versions of world history with scant regard for our actual context. As Australians we are only now beginning to take a hard, critical look at our actual setting and to ask ourselves that we may learn from the people with whom we share the continent and the region.²

One of the primary lessons that, indeed, we have absorbed from our aboriginal people is the importance of the landscape which is the principle experience that unites us all in Australia, irrespective of when we have arrived on these shores. The geography in which we live deeply affects consciousness, and therefore furnishes aspects of spirituality which are not universally shared but which are particularly experienced. As Carl Jung – albeit using the language of his time - observed,

The soil one stands on transmits its morphology into one's soul. Just as, in the process of evolution, the mind has been moulded by earthly conditions, so the same process repeats itself under our eyes today. . . . Certain Australian primitives assert that one cannot conquer foreign soil, because in it there dwell strange ancestor-spirits who reincarnate themselves in the new-born. There is a great psychological truth in this. The foreign land assimilates its conqueror . . . Everywhere the virgin earth causes at least the unconscious of the conqueror to sink to the level of its indigenous inhabitants.³

Such an insight is given recognition in a comment such as that afforded at the very beginning of the 20th century by A. G. Stephens:

¹ Michel de Certeau, "Mystic Speech," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 17, (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 83.

² Geoffrey Lilburne, "Contextualising Australian Theology: An Enquiry into Method," *Pacifica* 10 (1997), 350-351.

³ Carl Jung, "Mind and Earth" in *Civilisation in Transition*, Collected Works Volume 10, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970)

Our fathers brought with them the religious habit as they brought other habits of elder nations in older lands. Upon religion, as upon everything else, the spirit of Australia – that undefined, undefinable resultant of earth and air and conditions of climate and life – has seized, modifying, altering, increasing or altogether destroying. In the case of religious belief the tendency is clearly to destruction. [This due to] a skeptical and utilitarian spirit that values the present hour and refuses to sacrifice the present for any visionary future lacking a rational guarantee.⁴

Christian faith was introduced into both the Australian landscape and its unique cultural context nearly 250 years ago. It first arrived on our shores as an extension of the European Enlightenment and within the context of English penal colonialism. This has meant that the religious imagination in Australia has rarely presented as part of a grand narrative. Rather,

In fact, Australia was always more a country of Christians than a Christian country. European settlement was not motivated by some noble cause, far less by any notion that it was part of God's grand design. There is no foundational myth for Australia, let alone a religious one, no equivalent of America's Pilgrim Fathers . . .

What religious beliefs were brought out with the first settlers came as personal baggage, an emotional comfort from a world abandoned rather than a spiritual resource for conquering the new frontier.

The first official chaplains were regarded – and regarded themselves – as accessories to colonial administration. Their job was to keep the convicts in line by reminding them that a virtuous life endured in this world would bring rewards in the next. A censorious style, rather than a prophetic one, has been a hallmark of religious leadership ever since.

In this climate it is no surprise that it took five years for the first church to be built at Sydney Cove. It took only another five before it was burnt down by its disgruntled congregation. . .

There was a boom in church construction some years later when the Government began subsidizing the costs. But the effort to catch up had the effect of cocooning religion behind walls instead of letting it loose in the land to shape a culture.

Another effect was to encourage the idea that faith was best expressed in bricks and mortar. Indeed, religion in Australia became a building project. Muscular Christianity meant rolling up the shirt sleeves at parish weekend bees rather than imagining the nature of God's Kingdom and bringing it into the here and now.⁵

Catholic Faith, itself, was introduced to Australia through the lens of English Benedictinism by the appointment of John Bede Polding, monk of Downside, as first bishop in 1835. Establishing St. Mary's Priory in 1843, Polding's dream was of a Benedictine archabbey, a national Benedictine Church. However, Polding's Benedictine spirituality more significantly afforded a vision of Christian civilization based on justice and friendship. As he wrote in his Lenten Pastoral of 1856:

Before everything else we are Catholics: and next, by a name swallowing up all distinctions or origin, we are Australians; from whatsoever land we or our parents have arrived hither, be it from Ireland, from France, from England, from Scotland, from Germany, we are no longer Irishmen, and Frenchmen, and Englishmen, and Scotchmen, but Australians, and the man who seeks by word or writing to perpetuate invidious distinctions is an enemy to our peace and prosperity.

Polding died in 1877. His successor, Archbishop Vaughan, sought from Rome the dissolution of the Benedictine foundation. For by this time, the Irish presence in the Church in Australia had superseded English foundations. The presence of the displaced Irish had been heavily shaped by the 19th century Irish ecclesiasticism of Cardinal Paul Cullen who, upon his return from Rome to Dublin in 1850, had sought to reinvigorate the depressed Church in Ireland through a 'devotional revolution' by which mi

⁴ A. G. Stephens, 1904, quoted by Veronica Brady, "Land of the Spirit: A Review," *Pacifica* 4 (1991), 330-331.

⁵ Chris McGillion, "O Ye of Little Faith," *Sydney Morning Herald* 11 April 1998.

a new sense of Catholic identity might develop. It was Cullen who introduced into the Irish Church the rosary, Forty Hours, perpetual adoration, novenas, blessed altars, the Way of the Cross, Benediction, Vespers, devotion to the Sacred Heart and Immaculate Conception, shrines, processions, parish missions, the month of May for Mary, the litanies, votive candles, statues and pictures, and holy cards. Given that Cullen chose the first generation of Irish bishops in Australia, culminating in his nephew Cardinal Moran as Archbishop of Sydney, Australia became a colony of the Irish Church. The Irish formed an enclave despised or alienated in an English colony. To assuage this alienation and to assert their identity they turned to the one institution that was available to them, the Church, The parish became the way the Irish continued to be socialized. The buildings they constructed gave the people something to look at and be proud of; and the gathering of the money for them kept the people together and gave them a social life within the parish. The consequence was a spirituality that was entirely pragmatic.⁶

More positively, however, when such a spirit delved deeper into the vastness and isolation of the landscape itself, a pioneering spiritual framework began to emerge, evidenced especially in the Josephite initiate introduced by Julian Tenison Woods (1832-1889) and Mary MacKillop (1842-1909) Such is a study of inheritance and innovation in the shaping of the Australian religious consciousness. The outcome is a simple kind of spirituality, individual and homespun, never far removed from that of people in whatever circumstances they live.

The Church in Australia remained essentially Irish through to the 1960s. For only a very brief period in the 1960s to the 1980s did the Church experience itself as an autochthonous entity. By the 1990s a new multicultural Church has become our reality, and it will remain our future.

⁶ See Andrew Hamilton, "200 Years on Australian Theology," *Compass* 22 (1988:1-2), 32-38.