

THE SPIRIT OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

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IN THE SUMMER 2013 issue of *Australian Catholics*, which takes as its theme, *The Spirit of Indigenous Australia*, well-known leader Vicki Walker-Clark, of Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Melbourne, is quoted as saying:

What else is there we can do now? The Church isn't even asking the question any more. I would really like to see a gathering of Aboriginal people from around the Catholic community talking about this very thing.

The front cover of that same issue shows a painting by Indigenous artist, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, of Nauiyu (Daly River, N.T.), titled, *The Tree of Life*.

During these last two or three decades, the Indigenous voice has become resoundingly heard through some eloquent, convincing speakers. Political, social, economic fields of action humming with creative endeavour, well publicised through the media.

In one article for *The Weekend Australian*, April 24-25, 2010, Noel Pearson writes,

It is hard to capture the intangible engines of human motivation in a service plan or a program plan. Services and programs can be only secondary enablers and supports. Without the primary drivers there will be no fundamental and lasting change.

At this level of individual, the engine of human motivation that must be mobilised is self-interest...

In that same article, Pearson speaks of 'the absence of hope.' Again, in his book, *Up from the Mission, Selected Writings*, Black Inc., 2011, page 200: 'We need new hope.'

This present article is a non-Indigenous attempt to respond to Vicki's question, 'What else is there we can do now?' and to express

my agreement with Noel on the matter of 'motivation' and 'self-interest', granted their religious (Christian) grounding.

It appears to me that our efforts, nationally, of late, supported in such a wealth of scholarship, are neglecting one vital aspect of Indigenous advancement.

Not that it is wholly absent, but that it has got lost, buried beneath a weight of hard crust, all but impenetrable—'the secular'.

From government down, the resourceful striving to remedy Indigenous ills seems to have reached a dead-end. (Two more young Christian suicides last week, here in this small Dampier Peninsula. One of them, Catholic.)

Toward the end of a life's research across the vast terrain of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade arrived at this conviction: 'The 'sacred' is an element in structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness.'

Religion may be defined as motivated self-discipline. The motivation comes from one's particular faith; for us Christians, what we call 'the Gospel'.

Pearson's 'self' (community) needs closer study than we have so far come up with. A widening, strengthening of the base.

II

To start with: I am aware of the reality Nicholas Rothwell has so clearly drawn attention to recently of there being, in fact, two divergent Aboriginal situations in Australia—the 'urban' and the 'remote', or rural; and of its immediate bearing on our present topic: revival.

The following material, somewhat aca-

demic in flavour perhaps, is offered in the hope that Indigenous scholarship, so brilliantly articulate in secular politics, may take up the subject of the place and form of *sacrality* in the rugged Aboriginal here-and-now.

Not so many years ago, I was shaken to my core by finding, in the writing of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a passage which repeats, in Aboriginal Christian terms, one of the most suggestive statements about Nature-contemplation of 7th century spiritual luminary, Maximus Confessor, in chapter 32 of his great work, *Questions to Thalassios*.

Maximus is the last eminent theologian of the age of the Greek ‘Fathers’; initiator, one might say, of the Byzantine school.

I will quote first the words of Maximus concerning the contemplation of Nature, then the words of Miriam-Rose.

1) Maximus Confessor.

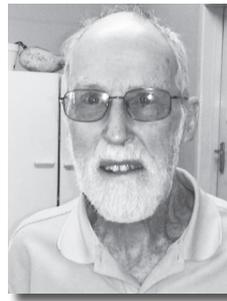
‘What do the words mean, ‘He made from one every nation of the world, having determined certain periods and the boundaries of every people’s country, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might grope after God and find God...’ (*Acts of the Apostles*, 17, 27). How is it that, groping, one can find God?

Reply:

‘Whoever sees the outside of things not according to sensation but, piercing through each visible symbol by means of the mind, and grasping passively the Godward word (*‘logos’*) hidden in each, that person finds God in the word.

Groping through the heap of material externals, he tries to find, hidden within each of them, the precious pearl ungraspable by bodily senses, that is to say, its *‘logos’*, (inner word, meaning).

Likewise whoever, not content with touching the outside of visible things by means of the bodily senses, but wisely searching with the faculty of intelligence for the *‘logos’* each created thing contains, that person finds God because, through the things produced, he



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comes to know the Cause which produced them.

Discernment is the property of ‘groping’. So, whoever knowledgeably approaches the symbols (externals), and sees understandingly with his eyes the outside of things, - applying his discernment to *Scripture* (I), to *Nature* (II) and to the *Self* (III) – and distinguishing literal and spiritual sense in the *Scripture*, ‘*logos*’ and outer appearance in *Nature*, sensation and intelligence in the *Self*; taking the spiritual meaning in *Scripture*, the ‘*logos*’ in *Nature*, the mind in the *Self*, to unite them together indissolubly—such a person has found God in that they have recognised, as far as is necessary and possible, the God present in them.

‘On the other hand, anyone who mixed these things up—the letter (of *Scripture*), the superficial (of *Nature*), and one’s own outer sense-perceptions, is ‘blind and myopic’ (2 Peter 1,9), victim of the disease which is ignorance of the cause of things.’

2) Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann

‘This is what I long for: that (I), with the words that come to us in the Gospel of Jesus, everyone will come to listen to the Sound of God. We all have to try to listen—to the God within us, to our own country and to one another...

There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware (II). My people are not threatened by silence. They are completely at home in it. They have lived for thousands of years with *Nature*’s quietness. My people today recognise and expe-

rience in this quietness the great Life-giving Spirit, the Father of us all. It is easy for me to experience God's presence. When I am out hunting, when I am in the bush, among the trees, on a hill or by a billabong, these are times when I can simply be in God's presence. My people have been so aware of Nature. It is natural that we will feel close to the Creator...

Today, I am beginning to hear the Gospel at the very level of my identity (III). I am beginning to feel the great need we have of Je-

sus—to protect and strengthen our identity, and to make us whole and new again.

If our culture is alive and strong and respected, it will grow. It will not die.

And our spirit will not die.'

Miriam-Rose, unwittingly, I would guess, or in other words by 'in-spiration'—has passively hit upon the same graced intuition as Maximus Confessor, expressing it more simply, more personally, less philosophically.

But then, Maximus was a Greek, wasn't he.

WORDS TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

To you, the students,

This International Day is about you. It is a day when our cultures are celebrated and recognised as being of great value and a gift to the world.

For over forty thousand years our culture knew about this thing that was bigger than our own self: Yuranbull, Wadjina, Bunjal, Biامي, God. Our lives were linked very closely through ceremony and lore, over thousands of years, to this being that showed itself to us in the many forms of our Dreamings.

Some four thousand years ago a man called Abraham, the Fathnerof our Christian faith, also knew Creator being, Yahweh. This always astounds me and is why I can really believe in this living God. This God who still speaks to us today through our Culture and our faith is the God of Abraham.

One hundred and seventy years ago this year we came to learn more about this person Jesus the Son of the Living God. His teachings have supported and strengthened our belief in this God who manifests itself in the

many things and peoples around us. We have always been people of faith. Today is no different. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are still the same.

Today you must take this opportunity which is before you through the education you are receiving to learn all you can about this modern world. This knowledge you gain will be the tool you will need to be able to move though your life and get the balance right between your own cultures and the modern world. As you can see you are not alone. Walk together. Have faith.

If there is one thing I can leave with you, it would be this:

Remember who you are and where you come from. Yes, learn the new way but also search and celebrate who you are as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is who you are and although things may change it is the great gift the Creator gave to us at the beginning of time. I wish you well.

—**Graeme Mundine, Executive Officer,
Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Sydney.**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students' Mass, St Mary's Cathedral, 9th August, 2013, Celebrating The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The Mass was attended by hundreds of indigenous students from Catholic schools in the Sydney Archdiocese. By 2014 more than 1000 indigenous students will attend Sydney Catholic Schools.