HOLY FIRE

Religious Poetry and Theology

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LET ME START by asking you to read the poem 'Holy fire'.

The Holy Fire

What are the signs which make a heart?
Compassion, of course, with tenderness
and a supple shoulder for others' tears.
But perhaps the deeper sign is fire;
not just emotion like that of rage
yet even that may purge the swollen bush
and spark new growth from old.

But what I seek is fire which spurns
the scribes and Herod's hypocrisy.
How I have gasped at Jesus' parables,
where the servant who would not forgive
the debt is given years and years with torturers;
or the monstrous tenants who, having killed
the master's son, see all their cities burnt.
Without a turn of heart, the torturing suggests
what might be their due … for false religion.

But holy fire is more, it makes
the world forgiven—and mid holy tears,
o'erwhelmed.

Are there any stirrings of the heart or mind—in particular, are there any intimations which could involve Koori ministry?

This poetry opens me to Colossians 1: 16: 'things visible and invisible'.

The phrase encourages us to be open to things invisible—to the inner world of intellectual, moral and religious conversion. It is the world of mystery and interiority where we may encounter Jesus in many forms. We need to justify the inner realm in our attempts to explain Christianity.

Poetry can be a doorway to this realm, and also to our experience of the sacral. It makes an inner space in which we may be able to embrace the invisible as well as the visible. Authenticity requires hospitality to all the operations of consciousness whether they be moral action, mystical experience or falling in love. Acceptance of subjectivity and feelings is key. This extends the data of consciousness without confining it in a rationalist framework of mind only. An horizon thus broadened is able to include the Koori's world of interiority.

Accepting the world of interiority challenges us to develop ways of identifying and working with its diversity. Poetry is the uncanny ability to fit thoughts and feelings together with words. It is an interior and often mysterious operation—a poem writes itself to some extent. So it was with the poem 'Holy Fire'. Let us go back to the poem itself.

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Les Murray has pointed out that the operation of poetry is often overlooked in our culture. However, grand explanatory schemes such as the Theory of evolution by natural selection and Christianity possess a poetic quality. They are dreamt as much as thought. Thus evolution is Darwin's 'poem' that emerged from his meditation on a large body of observed evidence and gave it significance. Such 'poems' are invested with a visionary power that makes them resilient to rational argument. For Murray, poetry works at the divide between rationality and dreaming by reconciling the two realms.[1] The foundational myths of a culture can be seen as a product of this kind of operation.

Sacramentality can also be seen in this poetic light, where the external objects and actions of a ritual intend an interior meaning. In the bible and Christian tradition 'fire' often signifies warmth, deliverance, and transfiguration. For example, the burning bush that is never consumed, the Chosen People who are led by a pillar of flame by night, and the Holy Spirit that

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takes the form of tongues of fire all indicate deliverance. The Church has long realised that Advent and Lent are poetic, and Eastertide even more so. In the liturgies of each season, fire sacramentality intends the experience of transfiguration, an emergence of a new form from a new experience.

Poetry taps at the door of interiority, which can be a preparation of the ground for Divine grace. Interiority is the door here, that opens the meaning behind the meaning. If interiority is not opened, myths remain stories. If it is opened, myths can explode into transfiguring fire. This may help us understand what Koories might feel to be their 'poem'.

I have a strong memory of the Koori activist, Mum Shirl Smith. I recall her presence within all the violence and corruption of her time, a respected champion of her people. At the same time I remember the lack of sufficient doctors who would treat Koories, the lack of lawyers to defend them and so on… She was part of the setting up of groups of doctors, lawyers, priests, sisters and brothers. And so began the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Medical Service, the Aboriginal Children's Service etc.

Mum Shirl shouting back

In Jesus' light I see Mum Shirl
anew, not just her tenderness to all
the Koori young ones in their pain.
She stood, like Jesus, arms around them
in the dock. Also, like Jesus, she was shouting,
shouting back at bureaucracies' hypocrisy.
And even threatening—my God yes, threatening!
Whilst modern scribes tut-tutted, whispering:
this is no way for her to speak *to us.*
Look how she fails to grasp the crucial point.
Indeed the gubbahs' point fades to empty
in the roar of fire. So in the jails and
at the higher tables she listened fearless,
with her heart aglow.
Within a holy fire.

My reflections on poetry and those of the poet, Les Murray, linking theology and poetry are further affirmed by Kwame Bediako, a Ghanaian theologian.[2] Bediako sees Christianity as a non-western religion where faith is meant to be received with primal sacramentality.

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To our surprise as westerners, we must admit that the primal lives on within our souls. To come to this realisation usually needs the prompting of some unexpected event. I recall such an event in my final year of school.

In the Body of the Snake

In 1948 I entered a school for prospective missionary priests. The school, situated just outside of Sydney, enjoyed a large bush setting. When I arrived there for my final school year, the Director of Studies seemed quite strict. Somewhat to my relief, after six weeks, he was replaced by another priest quite new to school administration. To kick off our relationship together he suggested we all picnic by a creek at the bottom of a precipitous gorge nearby. Next afternoon after class, with sandwiches packed, we climbed down to swim and play around the rocks.

With evening, a fire was lit and the meal organised. Just as we gathered to say grace, there was a rustle in the grass and a shout: 'Snake, snake!' The new priest moved swiftly, grabbing a branch on the way. He then held up for all to see the body of a long black snake. 'Have any of you ever eaten snake?' he said. We said, no. 'Let's cook it, you'll like it.' So the snake was skinned and cooked. We sat in a circle around the fire and the cooked snake was passed around. Each took a morsel. It tasted good, like poultry. Later, when we climbed out of the gorge we were not the same gaggle of boys who had come down.

In the days following, the modern mentality

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in me tried to keep the experience within rational boundaries. The snake had come simply to get water. Our eating its flesh was a spur of the moment decision. The atmosphere was heightened by darkness, fire-light and the bush. Really, it was nothing out of the ordinary. Yet there was another voice in my consciousness which insisted that this incident had brought to me (and to others, as I found out over the years) an experience of soul. In eating the black snake together we had participated in something mysterious. We were at the edge of an eerie reality. Perhaps it is only through such moments, outside the ordinary paths of our lives, that the primal asserts itself in consciousness.

What, then, characterises the primal? The sense of participating within a higher or sacred Mystery. Participation is evoked through immersion in nature and is aided by ceremonial action. Such action has a poetic, imaginative character by linking ritual with an invisible but very real communion with 'the source and channels of power in the universe'.[3] Bediako appears to suggest that such action has a primal dimension. He writes:

> The revelation of God in Christ is … the revelation of transcendence. The process is, however, not so much that of God *coming* to mankind, but rather, as the primal imagination perceives it, it is like the rending of the veil, so that the nature of the whole universe as instinct with the divine presence may be made manifest, as also the divine destiny of [humans] as an abiding divine-human relationship …The New Testament speaks in the idiom of the primal imagination when it declares that 'Now God's home is with [human]kind. He will live with them and they shall be his people'.[4]

Bediako argues that humans live in a sacramental universe, where there is no sharp dichotomy between physical and spiritual. The primal imagination enables the 'physical' to act as a sacrament for 'spiritual' power.

I found Bediako's stress on primal imagination borne out at the masses I attended in Tembisa, a black township outside Pretoria in South Africa. The whole congregation danced and sang, delighted, it seemed, to express the liturgy in a primal and sacral manner.

Of course, there are considerable differences between Catholic sacraments and aboriginal sacral ceremonies that need extensive discussion to elucidate. The work of Prof W.E.H. Stanner on the religion of Australian tribal Aboriginal people offers a good start for such a discussion.[5]

Bediako understands that the world view of Africa and of similar places provides a primal atmosphere conducive to faith. He sums up the (primal) African world view under four headings, namely:

- a human kinship with nature;
- a sense of being creatures before the sacred;
- a connection with a spiritual world behind the everyday;
- a communion of affection with the ancestors in the other life.

These components of the African world view all involve imagination. They go beyond the modern world view because they sense what is beyond the outer senses. Like poetry, imagination serves to reconcile seeming incompatibilities.

Bediako points out that the west received the Christian faith in much the same way as Africans, through other peoples. He goes on to ask why Christian faith still remains strong in Africa and similar places. He believes this is because these peoples have retained their primal imagination.

Bediako's thesis on imagination also receives support from John Henry Newman's *The Grammar of Assent*. Newman stated that imagination is a necessary dimension of faith for the reason that faith must be a matter of the heart and it is imagination which touches the heart.[6] Sacral imagination is thus an emotional operation of opening and reaching towards, rather than one of mental invention.

How close is Bediako's primal, African world view to that of Koories? I can say truly that I have heard Koories speaking of kinship with nature, the sacred, the spiritual world and the bonds of affection with those gone before them, particularly when connected with totems.

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Koories instruct their young on how to recognise the presence of their totems and how the totems can help them.

The world view presented by Bediako is helpful in several ways. It is a concise summary of the primal religious outlook and, at the same time it is useful for arousing sacral imagination. The varied situations of particular places make a difference. Most Koories are at least partly assimilated, yet there is a core longing for a return to a deeper sense of their tradition. Moreover, being now for several generations driven off their land with only the remnants of ceremony to help them, the mythical core of their tradition has to be stirred. Bediako's characterisation of the primal world view may give some idea of the form this may take.

In John's Gospel, the Greeks approach the Apostles asking to see Jesus (John 12: 20-22). The Uniting Church aboriginal administrator and theologian Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra has insisted that Aborigines long to see Jesus as well, but with Aboriginal eyes.[7] Instinctively it seems to them Jesus is not the possession of the westerners. This resonates with Bediako's thesis that Christianity is not a western religion. It is translatable to the whole world through the immediacy of the Spirit which enlivens the primal imagination.

Many Koories seem to be awaiting a new myth. At present their search is focused on their inherited tradition. When that search of their tradition is felt as fulfilled, then may they be more open to the Christian tradition. There will be an unease among some Aboriginal people until they can hear in Christian symbols some primal resonance.

The Rainbow Spirit Elders far North Queensland provide some indication of how a new myth grounded in both tribal and biblical tradition can emerge. They write:

> We believe that we are now empowered by the suffering and resurrection of Christ to discern Christ's presence in our culture and the presence of the Creator Spirit in our land.[8]

In dialogue with scripture scholars Norman Habel and Robert Bos, they have identified parallels between traditional and biblical mythologies. Drawing upon Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 8 vs 19-23, the symbol of their new myth that emerges is a sense that the land is weeping.[9] Paul writes of creation weeping with pain, a pain centred within God. This weeping could refer to the great drought torturing the land. However, that might be reducing the moral level of the myth. It is a weeping over human failure, the failure of aboriginal reconciliation with the gubbahs. The openness of spirit which reconciliation demands is a quality of the new spirit calling out within them. In Rom 8: 21 the crying in creation is understood as the birth pangs of a new beginning: peoples, animals, trees, rivers and the religious realm itself resonate with the hope of new birth.

They are Spirit Elders indeed. Here are aboriginal people with their primal imagination challenging the modern Whites. The weeping land is indeed the breaking through of a new myth.

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