

SHAPING AN AUSTRALIAN SPIRITUALITY

JIM QUILLINAN

IN 2003 THE Pontifical Councils for Culture and for Interreligious Dialogue issued a discussion paper entitled, *Jesus Christ the bearer of the Water of Life*. Cardinal Poupard, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture wrote in the forward to this document that ‘the success of New Age growth is a response to people’s longing for peace, harmony and reconciliation within themselves, with others and with nature.’ The paper remarked that the success of New Age thinking and practice offers the Church a challenge:

The search which often leads people to New Age is a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something that will touch their hearts and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world (*Water of Life*, no. 1.5).

While this document may be over ten years old and perhaps New Age may not be as popular, this genuine yearning for a deeper spirituality still motivates many people. The document urges the Church to ask the reason why people go looking elsewhere for genuine sources that might be found to feed our longing for peace, harmony, community and even deeper meaning in our lives. The document includes a very timely reminder that ‘authentic spirituality is not so much about our search for God, but God’s search for us’ (*Water of Life* no. 3.3).

For some these are anxious times. Old certainties and the old answers are not always seen as relevant or as helpful. In these times of uncertainty, many of the institutions, customs and ways of thinking which we relied on for stability and security are being challenged. So where does God search for us today and how do we connect with that search? In recent times

there have been a number of articles written in various places about our Australian spirituality. That poses the question: how does God seek us out in our country, in this place and at this time? Is there a peculiarly Australian culture, an Australian way of thinking and doing and believing? Do we still hold to the myth that ‘real’ Australians live in the Outback, that somehow we do not have a genuine identity if we are not, in some way, linked with these vast open spaces, with our wilderness areas? Or is our Australian spirituality evolving, just as our national identity is changing, evolving and growing.

It is surprising to read statistics about tourism in Australia today. In the last three decades Australians have travelled overseas and even lived overseas for longer periods of time. Some, particularly our young people, have chosen to live and work in other countries for months or even years before they return. In these times when the Australian dollar is so competitive with overseas currencies, the number of Australians travelling overseas has reached unprecedented proportions. Perhaps even more interesting, however, are the figures about where Australians travel within our vast continent. While the numbers visiting what we term The Outback remain steady, the reality is that few contemporary Australians have visited our remote areas. Australians seem to choose to travel to coastal regions, particularly in the southern winter. The numbers visiting wine growing areas is steadily increasing. The bottom line is that few of us have experienced the wilderness or Outback areas—while we might claim them and admire those who live there, they are not part of our day to day thinking, our psyche. It would seem

when we go to re-create, to be at peace with ourselves, our families, we do so in foreign countries or along our coastline. Even many, if not the majority of those who work in our remote mining centres do so on a fly in, fly out basis. The vast and open skies of Australia are just as vast and open overseas!

But place does shape us spiritually. Robert Hamma suggests that:

Where we live and work, where we choose to go not only reflects our likes and dislikes but they also shape who we are. These places shape us spiritually as well. They mark significant moments in our life story, they provide a refuge and sanctuary in time of spiritual need, and they serve as gateways to the divine. And day by day the ordinary places of our lives leave their mark on us. They become part of us and we become part of them. (*Landscapes of the Soul*, p.14)

So how does contemporary Australia shape us spiritually? The traditional view held that the wilderness areas of Australia, those vast and uncompromising places, these places of grandeur and silence, gave us a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of the sacred, an experience even of the presence of God. Today it would appear that there is a growing loss of belief in a personal God for a number of reasons. In Australia, is this loss encouraged because we no longer have such a sense of place, this place of vast silence where the Spirit was unencumbered in inspiring us? Is it encouraged because we are now so much more connected with the world we live in? Have we become global citizens as well as global believers or non-believers?

Today we are a people on the move, within Australia and overseas. New settlers arrive almost daily, many from war torn and troubled places where violence, famine and hardship are daily experiences. The experience they bring with them has driven them to question whether the God they once believed in has the power to bring about change in this world. The dreadful experiences of war and famine, as well as random acts of violence that have impacted on the world, have made some people very cynical towards religion and in reality



Jim Quillinan has been Deputy Director of Catholic Education in Townsville and Head of Educational Services and Coordinator of Spirituality and Leadership for the Diocese of Sale. He writes the fortnightly Spirituality Newsletter 'Along the Track'.

they are unable to find any room for believing in a personal and loving God. Their very presence in our midst raises the challenging question, why can't God stop these wars and famines and natural disasters?

Our towns and cities are changing. Whereas once the steeples of Christian churches were the only symbols of religious belief on our skylines, we now see minarets, temples and structures that testify to other beliefs, other ways of seeking meaning and purpose, other ways of worshipping God. While there appears to be wide-spread disillusionment with traditional, institutional religion, there is growing interest in Oriental paths of wisdom and enlightenment. In recent decades Australians have begun exploring places which have put them into a closer contact with the religions and practices of various Oriental cultures from Ancient Egypt to India and Tibet. This exposure has encouraged many to adopt Eastern practices and faiths such as Buddhism. There is also an element of 'one religion is as good as another'. On the other hand, there is an emerging conviction that there exists a deep-down truth, an essence of truth in the heart of every religious experience. This has led to the idea of a form of religion which we can express by gathering the various elements from different religions and cultures forming them into an experience which suits our times and cultural identity. In such an enterprise there is little room for institutionalized religions. There is a very noticeable cultural shift from traditional forms of religion to more personal and individualistic expressions

of ‘spirituality’. Is it now enough to call ourselves ‘spiritual but not religious’?

Australians have also joined the trend of disconnection from mainstream churches. While evangelical churches are experiencing a revival, the traditional Christian churches are in decline as far as attendance is concerned, except perhaps for the growing number of immigrants from traditional Catholic countries. Prof Alan Black (Edith Cowan University) suggests that religion and spirituality are increasingly seen as a matter of individual perception and choice. We are living in a post-traditional era, with increasing eclecticism, he argues. In Australian society,

- 24% find their sense of identity and meaning in the Christian faith;
- 17% find it in spirituality—either of an eclectic style, or a spirituality of nature or land
- 2% find it in religions other than Christianity; and
- 57% in secularism.

It is easy to blame the demise of religion in modern society on science or anti-religious feelings or philosophy even, seen in the rise of more militant atheism. But organised religion must face its own blame. Religion has declined not because it was refuted, but because it has become for many irrelevant, dull, oppressive. For those who feel that way, like the salt Jesus spoke of, religion has become insipid...when religion speaks only in the name of authority, when it looks inward only, when it focuses on its own survival rather than speaking and acting with the voice of compassion, connecting with the lives and aspirations of today’s Australians, its message becomes meaningless to them.

There is a growing sense of unease in our culture. Our overseas travel has given us an experience of how far Australia is from other parts of the world, not just because of the long hours spent in the air. The ease with which we can travel between countries in Europe and Asia is a graphic contrast to the vast distances within Australia and in our getting to some-

where else. Technological advances and vastly improved communications have improved our connection with the outside world, as it were, but they have also increased our awareness that we belong to an increasingly complex world. Distance and isolation no longer cocoon us from overseas trends or problems or movements. While we escaped the worst aspects of the recent Global Financial Crisis, an increasing insecurity has persisted and a lack of confidence is evident in our spending habits and in our views about our immediate future. The arrival of refugees by both boat and air also highlight the fact that we are no longer so isolated. Australians have always prided themselves on the fact that Australia is a desirable place to live but these new arrivals have raised questions about what we hold to be important. The debates in our community about this complex issue have not been all that edifying. The values of self-sufficiency, mateship and ‘a fair go’ that we once declared to be our national characteristics, are being seriously questioned in this debate.

This disconnection can also be seen in other aspects of Australian society. In his book *Advance Australia Where?* Hugh McKay writes that Australians consider our society is degenerating, brought about by a lack of connectedness, a surrender to materialism and unbridled selfishness (p.10). Our working life has become more ‘fragmented’ as a result of significant social and economic change in Australia. There is a widening gap between haves and have-nots as opportunities for work become more specialised and unemployment and underemployment increase. Almost daily in the media we see stories of industry restructuring and the disappearance of jobs and occupations. Those in work are required to work longer and the work/life balance is becoming more acute. Global factors intrude as international factors such as increased competition, consumption and investment have contributed to the above changes. These factors fuel our insecurity. Rev Dr Philip Hughes, senior research officer of the Christian Research Asso-

ciation, suggests that, despite the relative prosperity in Australia,

- 10 per cent of Australians say they are not very happy,
- 56 per cent are fairly happy, and
- 32 per cent are very happy.

Among the issues that cause them concern are the growing number of failures in family relationships, rural decline and uncertainty and the lack of a clear future for many indigenous people. There is also insecurity about terrorism and crime, climate change, and ‘who we are’. There are distractions in consumerism and substance abuse, but little vision for the future. If people find meaning, they find it in themselves.

Technological advances have brought with them an explosion of information and knowledge—so much is now so readily at hand. It would appear at times that what was once a ‘mystery’ can now be explained, that Google has become our source of knowledge. Like other places in Western culture, there is now what is often called a more ‘scientific’ view of reality. But, according to Rabbi Abraham Heschel, we have fallen into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered.

Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. (*Man Is Not Alone, a Philosophy of religion*, 1951)

Perhaps that may be the starting point for renewal—a deeper appreciation of what we have today, not in financial terms but rather what this vast country offers us. It is not the Australia of the first settlers who came here tens of thousands of years ago, although we have much to learn from them. It is not the Australia of the convicts and those who followed quickly on their heels. It is not the Australia of the post war migrants and refugees from war torn Europe or the Australia of those who have joined us from the Middle East and

Africa and Asia. Australia is about all of this. We have been gifted by them all. They are all an integral and fundamental part of our identity. Today, however, I suggest that we have reached a point when we are undergoing a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness.

Firstly, where most of us choose to live and work is in our very multi-cultural, multi faith cities. In Australia we value the freedom to choose own spiritual path. But we are not disconnected individuals, disconnected from each other, or from our past or from our environment or indeed all of life. Together we are on a journey that asks us to listen to our past, as well as the present with all its richness and diversity and the voice deep within us. It is important to allow and encourage that voice to speak.

There is an element of hedonism in our Australian way of life—perhaps the sunshine, the climate, our relaxed way of living give expression to that but it also provides an opportunity for contact with the living God. Too often human fulfilment is presented as only happening in the next life. In a paper entitled ‘Towards a Christian Spirituality’, ethicist and theologian Rufus Black writes that:

The consequence of this belief is that all the other types of human fulfilment are relativised or even, as in the case of the fulfilment that comes with the joys of bodily life, deprecated. The result is that resources of Christian spirituality have been too narrowly focused on the quest for God rather than on the quest for a fulfilled human life, of which the quest for God is only one part. Thus there have been too few resources created to help people see the depths of reality in all the particularity of everyday life. (‘Towards a Christian Spirituality’, Institute for Spiritual Studies, 2004)

Perhaps Australians with their love of sport, the outdoors, with fitness and trying new adventures might give expression to Jesus’ desire ‘that you might have life more abundantly’ (Jn. 10:10). Australians are asking the question what it means to live a fulfilled life in the here and now. There is a small but sig-

nificant number of Australians who are now adopting the sea or tree change life. Others are seeking a better work and home life balance. There is a questioning of the incessant search for more wealth. There is also a move for more control over our lives. The quest to restore balance in life is really the expression of the fact that spirituality is a practical, not just a reflective, religious concern. Our quest for a more fulfilled human life might well be the starting point to enable those who are searching to experience something more, something beyond the obvious, something of the spiritual dimension of life which also needs fulfilment.

Our spiritual quest is timeless and ongoing, a quest that seeks answers to our ultimate questions. If the Christian churches are to assist, they need to connect, to journey with those on this quest not with a set of answers but with the central tenet of our faith, a belief in and experience of the living God. We begin not with a set of preconceived ideas or notions about the nature of a Supreme Being but with the desire in every human being for an experience of the transcendent. Very often churches are seen as regurgitating and defending old doctrines however important that may seem, rather than communicating the very central beliefs which give them their meaning and purpose—belief in the living God and in the person and message of Jesus Christ. So often we hear sermons which talk of doctrine and formulas but do not explain how they enhance our quality of living, how they contribute to our fulfilment as human beings. The awareness which opens our minds to the existence of a Supreme Being is an awareness of a divine presence, a sense that something lies behind what we see and feel, behind the created moment. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with such moments of awe and wonder. It is more than a feeling. It is an answer of the heart and mind to the presence of mystery in all things.

Experiencing the Living God may begin when we are struck with an awareness of the immense preciousness of being, of just being

alive. It begins when we are moved by the beauty and majesty of creation and our part in it. It begins when we look outward and beyond ourselves in the service of others. It is not a matter of simply contemplating our navel. In many ways it calls us to go back to basics. It calls for new ways of thinking, new ways of connecting, new ways of helping people find the sacred in all things, even the most ordinary - new ways of connecting with each other. It may be timely to reconnect with our land, to appreciate its beauty and its harshness, to appreciate its enormity and its extraordinary variety. In earlier times, both with the aboriginal people and the early settlers, there was a much deeper appreciation of and respect for the land. For many it brought them closer to an experience of the sacred.

Perhaps that reconnection has begun. There is, I suggest, a new and growing consciousness in Australia and a new understanding of the dynamic interdependence of all life. This growing consciousness of interdependence is evidenced in such popular movements such as Landcare which is attracting a significant following of young and old committed to the restoration of our natural reserves. We are not as complacent as we once were to unbridled development, especially in areas we consider to be sensitive historically, culturally or environmentally. But reconnection is more than just to the land. The gradual change in our attitude to the new arrivals coming by boats to seek refuge is a good example of this growing change. We are becoming more conscious that our rugged self-sufficiency may have worked in the past but the world is becoming smaller and even more interdependent. We need others just as much as we have in past eras. It is heartening to see the numbers of Australians working in developing countries overseas, again with such generosity and compassion. Australians have been extraordinarily generous when natural disasters have struck – Australians gave generously when the tsunami devastated parts of Asia, to the victims of the earthquake in New Zealand and the catastro-

phe in Japan. Within our own shores, when devastating bushfires and floods have hit in recent years, Australians have risen to the call for generosity and compassion..

There is an increasing need for genuine dialogue with believers of all faiths and non-believers alike. None of us has all the wisdom, none of us possesses all the truth. We live in an age characterised by world-wide religious and political polarization. Both religious and political fundamentalism is on the rise. Australia is not immune from that movement, that desire to seek certainty in times of historic and quite fundamental change in so many areas. Rather than encouraging dialogue, genuine and open conversation, finding scapegoats, someone to blame and vilify is often the preferred course. The antennae of enforcers of orthodoxy are always cocked for such unsettling conversations. Genuine and honest religious dialogue may be difficult but it is essential. For many, dialogue is a code word for compromise. Rather it is born from a genuine desire to seek new understandings. It must be at one and the same time anchored in our own cultural and religious beliefs but open to others and capable of promoting understanding, co-operation, love and compassion. Too often such dialogue gets bogged down and obscured by antagonism. Take the recent encounter with Cardinal Pell and Richard Dawkins—it was promoted as a battle, a fight rather than an exchange of ideas. Interfaith dialogue, dialogue with those who profess atheism or who are just plain secularists can be an enriching challenge for all involved, an opportunity for growth rather than reinforcing rigidly held positions. Faith is more than the sum of its constituent beliefs. Faith is surely a way of enabling us to imagine anew and experience anew the world we live in at this time in history. Dialogue ‘challenges us to rediscover the power of myths without becoming captivated by the need to develop rigid belief patterns around them’. (David Tacey, *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*).

Churches are regarded by many as irrel-

evant to the major national debates with nothing much to add to the challenges such as climate change, our changing lifestyles or building a sustainable economy. When the Church speaks about God and about spiritual values, there is a distance from the traditional rhetoric used. In addition, Religion is regarded as a private lifestyle choice, not as a contributor to political discourse. One of the challenges for the Christian faith is to tell the Christian story and expound the Christian principles of love and grace, justice and forgiveness, equality and the worth of all individuals in a way that demonstrates its relevance for the Australian national story. Recent scandals which have plagued the churches have dented their credibility. Nevertheless, while church involvement has declined with just fifteen per cent of the population attending Sunday services monthly or more often, the church-run schools have increased in numbers. There is a strong presence of the churches in social justice, health and welfare. Perhaps that gives us a clue about the shape of our Australian Spirituality as it stands today. In analysing the Parable of the Good Samaritan Fr Andrew Hamilton writes that:

This story, which encapsulates Jesus’ ethic, suggests that groups inspired by a Christian motivation should always begin by looking outwards to ask who in their world are in need of healing, freedom and love, and asking how we can reach them.

That starting point leads to a different logic than the logic of identity. The conversation will go in three directions. It will lead people to ask how they can best support each other in their faith and in their commitments so that they can continue to give themselves happily and effectively to strangers.

It will also lead them to reflect on their society in concrete terms. They will ask what forces enhance and diminish the freedom and dignity of the people who are bruised. Accordingly, they will naturally build relationships with people and groups that have a different ideology, but whose lives and work reflect a passion for the humanity of the disregarded. These Samaritans

will be their natural allies. (*Eureka Street*, 'Does Catholic identity matter?', Andrew Hamilton, March 30, 2011))

Australians are, by and large, a practical people. They are doers, looking outwards, as Hamilton suggests, concerned with the here and now. If the Church is to have a part in developing an Australian Spirituality befitting this time and place, we need to ask the question 'What's happening?' and not to answer with the scholastic arguments for God, but to show our living faith experience. What is happening in the churches, schools, hospitals, church groups to enhance the quality of life for ourselves and our fellow Australians? What is happening to help us live a more fulfilled life? What is happening to feed our longing for peace, harmony and community? What partnerships have we formed to enhance the quality of life for all Australians? What is happening to ensure that people are treated with justice and compassion. How can what is happening involve me in being of service to others, to be agents of healing in our communities. Is it any wonder that Jesus' pic-

ture of the Last Judgement is about what we have done for each other, what we have done to feed the hungry, the poor, visiting the lonely and those in prison. It is in reaching out to others, especially those who are in need that we discover even deeper meaning in our lives and we shape a spirituality befitting this time and place. Is this how and where God is seeking us out today?

When we focus on our ultimate fulfilment being only the vision of God in the life to come, there is a denial of much of our humanity, not valuing what is good in this life and where real satisfaction and happiness lies in the here and now. A worthwhile and relevant spirituality will value the relationships we have built up over the years, the expression of our creativity in our work, the skills we have acquired, the friendships we have made, the justice we have fought for and how we have worked together with others. Then we can ask ourselves what new possibilities might arise in the ways in which we interact with each other and with God who continues to seek us out.

REFERENCES

Pontifical Council for Culture, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life, A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'*, 2003
 Robert M Hamma, *Landscapes of the Soul*, Notre Dame Indiana: 1999.
 Hugh McKay, *Advance Australia Where?* Hachette Australia, 2007
 David Tacey, *Re-Enchantment: The New Austral-*

ian Spirituality, Harper Collins, 2000.
 Andrew Hamilton, *Eureka Street*, 'Does Catholic identity matter?', March 30, 2011
 Rabbi Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone, a Philosophy of Religion*, 1951
 Rufus Black, 'Towards a Christian Spirituality', Institute for Spiritual Studies, 2004
 Rev Dr Philip Hughes and Professor Alan Black Day, 'Shaping Australia's Spirituality' Conference, 2010

As they live their daily lives in the world with faith, all Christians face the challenge of interpreting the events and crises that arise in human affairs, and all engage in conversation and debate in which, inevitably, faith is questioned and a response is needed. The whole Church lives, as it were, at the interface between the Gospel and everyday life, which is also the boundary between the past and the future, as history moves forward. The Church is always in dialogue and in movement [...]. 'With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God [...] to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of the divine Word, in order that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented' (*Gaudium et Spes* 44).

—**International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, March 8, 2012.**