4. A flaw in the nation-building process: Negotiating the sacred in our multicultural society

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In a way our topic is strangely anachronistic: blasphemy is a problematic notion in a professedly secular society like ours. It is true, of course, that laws against it are still on the books in most states and territories. But they are laws inherited from the English legal system, designed to protect the established religion of the Church of England which was 'part and parcel of the laws of England' and the monarch, 'the defender of the faith'. In that, these laws against blasphemy served to protect the social fabric rather than any particular theological position. Australia, however, has never had an established Church, and even if we had there is little danger that speaking out against it or any other Christian Church or indeed other religion would shake the foundations of the state. Indeed, I sometimes think that speaking in its favour might be more likely to do so.

The current suspicion of Islam is perhaps a case in point, especially in the inadequacies it reveals in our notions of multiculturalism. The suspicion is probably more political than religious, fuelled by fear of the terrorism associated—not always accurately—with Islam in the popular imagination. By and large, Australians are not interested in theological matters—and sometimes, it seems in questions of right and wrong, at the public level at least—and our society is self-consciously and often self-congratulatorily secular, which is understandable in the light of the divisive nature of the sectarian squabbles of the nineteenth century. In the early days of Federation A. G. Stephens, the literary editor of *The Bulletin*, associated the suspicion of religion with 'mental enlightenment'¹ and even today the general belief is still that the open and tolerant society which we like to think we live in depends on the exclusion of religion—often a source of conflict in the past—from the public sphere. I want, however, to argue to the contrary, that a multicultural society like ours badly needs to recover a sense of the sacred as a kind of canopy under which people of different cultures and beliefs can live together with mutual respect. Before we go any further, however, a crucial point needs to be clarified. I do not want to identify the sacred only with organised religion. Rather, I see it as the product of the world view William James describes in *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*, a sense that the 'so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe and...[that] there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we know nothing

positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists'.²

It is, that is to say, a sense of the sacred, of some ultimate mystery which fascinates us yet fills us with awe and demands our respect and obedience. Although, as the New South Wales Law Reform Commission noted in its report on the subject, blasphemy means different things to different people in our society, it has, I would argue, a core meaning, the profanation of this sacred reality. Most cultures throughout history have had some such sense of an unseen world which claims our obedience and respect. By and large, however, as I have argued, most Australians have fixed their attention on the visible and material, giving priority to them. As Stephens saw it, 'there is in the developing Australian character a sceptical and utilitarian spirit that values the present hour and refuses to sacrifice the present for any visionary future lacking a rational guarantee'.³ This is perhaps not surprising in a settler society facing a difficult environment. But it has led to an emphasis on the short term. Especially as far as our use of the land is concerned this has led to problems. But this is true also, and perhaps especially, in our relations with Aboriginal Australians whose cultures are imbued with a deep sense of the sacred and the obligation to honour its claims. Where for most of us, however, the claims of economic development are paramount so that this obligation, in this instance to protect sacred sites, leads them to see as blasphemy what many, if not most, of us, would see as good business.

I would argue, however, that in the long run this indifference to the claims of the sacred may prove politically and socially destructive and would also contend that it represents an ontological and epistemological mistake. In fact there are 'more things in heaven and earth' than are dreamed of in a merely pragmatic and utilitarian culture. This is especially the case as far as human relations and their extension, politics are concerned. There questions of right and wrong eventually have an effect. As Raymond Gaita argues, 'Even in politics we are, inescapably, moral beings. No adequate concept of our interests or of our well-being should ignore or diminish that fact'.⁴ Certainly the evidence suggests that the current lack of concern for justice and truth in public life has affected the tone and quality of our public life. Self-interest does not provide a proper base for social coherence.

Indifference to the sacred has also made national identity a problematic matter. Since the self lacks a sense of an authority beyond itself, identity is often equated with conformity. Hence Australian identity has often been defined in exclusionary terms: if we are not entirely clear who we are, we can at least say that we are not like 'those others'. The Constitution excluded Aboriginal Australians from citizenship, for example, on the grounds of 'difference'—which implicitly meant that they were 'inferior' to us. Similarly the so-called 'White

Australia Policy' was for many years directed against non-Caucasian migrants on similar grounds. According to Lisa Strelie, in an essay discussing the apparent inability of the Howard government to contemplate a treaty with Aboriginal Australians, this failure to develop a comprehensive notion of humanity represents a fundamental 'flaw in the nation-building process'.⁵ It is also becoming increasingly clear that it creates problems in our relations with people and cultures different from ours.

For our present purposes it is useful to reflect on the historical causes of this 'flaw'. Like most settler societies, in the nineteenth century especially, Australia is the product of the history of empire, a history, Karl Jaspers suggests, which has arrogated to itself a 'grandeur...stolen from God' and has presented itself as fate, a 'grand triumphal march' through the world of certain people, who as the spearhead of civilisation are destined to rule the world.⁶ As Luiz Carlos Susin points out, it thus becomes a 'form of critical understanding which identifies and distinguishes good and evil in a very particular way, based on itself, on its glorious position as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out at its feet'.⁷ This helps to explain our present government's self-confidence and apparent lack of self-interrogation in its dealings not only with asylum seekers, Aboriginal Australians and those less successful in economic, social or intellectual terms but also with our Asian neighbours.

But ultimately, I would argue, it is disabling since it locks us into a 'closed circle around sameness'⁸ which prevents us from coming to terms with our actual, as distinct from our imagined, situation. Susin suggests that imperial identity is based on the model of Ulysses who left home and travelled through strange places but always intended to return home. By and large, this was true of the first free settlers in Australia who were determined, if they were not able to return home, to make the new place the equivalent of home, a 'new Britannia in another world', as W. C. Wentworth put it.⁹ British values, purposes, names and architecture were imposed on a very different environment so that our culture was post-modern *avant la lettre*, resting on 'the exaltation of signs based on the denial of the reality of things'.¹⁰

Enclosed in our own imaginary world in many ways we failed to recognise the reality and power of the land, seeing it as *terra nullius*, empty and useless until our arrival. We were thus unaware of the long history of the place and the knowledge of it built up over thousands of years by its First Peoples. To borrow Wittgenstein's image, our own story held us captive so that we were merely tracing round its frame when we looked at the new world opening out before us rather than coming to terms with the realities which confronted us.¹¹ The ecstatic description of nineteenth century Melbourne in the colonial romance, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, is a good example of this self-enclosure:

[T]wenty-two years ago the Yarra rolled its clear waters to the sea through the unbroken solitude of a primeval forest. Now there stands a noble city, with crowded wharves, containing with its suburbs not less than 20,000 inhabitants . . . and through the low sandy heads that close the great port towards the sea *thirteen millions sterling* of exports is carried away each year.¹²

There is little sense of the past here. What matters is the future, the transformation of what is different into the familiar, the stamping of their own image on the world by the colonists. The passage celebrates the work of human minds and hands and there is no sense of any other authority. The place itself, it seems, is merely a means to an end and the settlers are free to transform it in their own image.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that questions about the nature of reality cannot be ignored. Nor can questions of right and wrong. Injustice and cruelty, in the past as well as in the present, clearly have social consequences. The 'winners', the successful and powerful do not have a monopoly of wisdom. Indeed their very success may lock them into positions that are ultimately unsustainable. Those who were defeated, the Aboriginal dead, for example, and all those others whose lives went unvalued and unreported may have a meaning yet to be realised. Their memory may remind us that the present order of things does not represent the last word on human possibility. Meaning, as J. B. Metz remarks, 'is not a category that is only reserved for the conquerors'.¹³ It is also becoming clear that freedom and justice degenerate 'wherever those who suffer are treated more or less as a cliché and degraded to a faceless mass'.¹⁴

Even in the nineteenth century there were those who understood this. An English visitor, Constance Gordon-Cumming, for example, deplored what she called the 'ruthless policy of [the] extermination' of Aboriginal people in Queensland according to which whole tribes have been shot down for daring to trespass on lands taken from them without any sort of right'. She rejected the view that 'the extinction of the Australian black' was not, as its advocates declared, 'a law of nature' but 'an illustration of the might that makes right'.¹⁵

A sense of the sacredness of every person is surely the guarantee of the 'right relationships' which are the basis of any civilised society, and the growing coarseness, insensitivity, and xenophobia evident in Australian society today underline this point. A multicultural society especially needs an authority beyond the self, some 'absolute heterogeneity that unsettles all the assurances of the same in which we comfortably ensconce ourselves'.¹⁶ Otherwise the individual becomes merely part of what Simone Weil calls the 'social machine', a machine for 'breaking hearts and crushing spirits...[and] manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, dizziness'.¹⁷

The totalitarian implications are clear. Consider, for example, the slogan of those opposed to Aboriginal Land Rights, 'One Land, One Law, One Culture'—a slogan which echoes Hitler's 'One Land, One Law, One People.' Looking more widely, the fortress mentality underlying the government's treatment of asylum seekers and their supporters reflects a similar fear of difference and support for the Prime Minister's determination to build a society which is 'unapologetically and unashamedly Australian'—according to his monolithic definition.

Nevertheless another tradition runs through our culture which questions the assumptions of imperial history and the myth of 'progress'—at least as defined in material terms. It is concerned with those excluded from or damaged by this history, the 'losers' rather than the 'winners', those who are poor, ill, disadvantaged or different. This is the tradition of 'a fair go'. At the moment, it is true, it seems to be in abeyance, especially in public life. But, unfashionable as it may seem, it is still alive. Not long before he retired, the World Bank's James Wolfensohn, himself an Australian, for instance, noted that in a recent survey 55 per cent of the population supported aid for developing nations not for pragmatic reasons but 'because it is the moral thing to do.'

The premises of this tradition are not formally religious—indeed it is often suspicious of institutional religion. But it rests on a sense of the absolute dignity of every person, regardless of wealth, position or power. For many this also includes a reverence for the land. Joseph Furphy, for instance believed that there was a 'latent meaning' in it which it is our task to interpret 'faithfully and lovingly'.¹⁸ In similar vein, Marcus Clarke felt a power in the land before which the 'trim utilitarian civilization which bred him shrinks into insignificance'.¹⁹ In this tradition the settlers face a task which is imaginative, spiritual even, as well as economic, what Mircea Eliade describes as 'the transformation of chaos into cosmos'.²⁰ It thus looks beyond history to accept the 'vast augustness' of existence but also accepts the limits of human intention, power and knowledge when confronted with 'the icy laws of outer fact'.²¹ This means respecting rather than denying or trying to conquer the strangeness of this place. To accept this strangeness may also open up the possibility Mircea Eliade canvassed when he wrote that we may have reached a point at which, in order to survive, humanity may need to desist 'from any further "making" of history in the sense in which we have made it from the beginnings of the first empires' and learn to respect cosmic reality and its authority.²²

This may seem romantic. But it makes sense in the light of contemporary science which speaks increasingly and with increasing respect of what is unseen. To quote William James once more, this involves a 'sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious',²³ a sense of the sacred. Far from being romantic, however, this puts us in tune with what is actually the case, our bodily situation—as, arguably,

our present culture, resting as it does on 'the exaltation of signs based on the denial of the reality of things',²⁴ is not.

As James points out, however, the 'method of averting one's attention from evil and living simply in the light of the good is splendid as long as it will work...[But] the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality'. Indeed, as he says and as I have been arguing, they may be the 'best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth'.²⁵ It is all very well for politicians to promise to make us all feel 'relaxed and comfortable' but to ignore the other side of our story is no way to create a civilised and durable, much less a multicultural society.

To conclude then. I have been arguing that the discovery/recovery of a sense of the sacred may well be the crucial task facing us as a people. It is also, I suggest, the way to create a genuinely multicultural society. If that is so, those we have excluded in the past may become a key resource. This may be especially the case with Aboriginal Australians. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs make a similar suggestion when they write that Aboriginal Australians may have a key role to play in any attempt to recast our sense of ourselves.²⁶

This is not only because their story casts a different light on our history but also because, as they put it, Aboriginal culture's sense of the sacred may be 'integral to what we might (or should) "become"'. Indeed in their view it is 'precisely because Aboriginal sacredness appears so out-of-step with modernity that it is able to be identified as the very thing modernity needs'.²⁷ History is not the final arbiter. Nor does it encompass the full range of reality. We need to question our culture's belief in its self-sufficiency. Without a sense of the value of every person and of the natural world on which we depend 'right relationships' will not develop. Equally, 'if an awareness of and reverence for...the sacred [is lacking], the paths of true healing cannot emerge'.²⁸ The sacred and the secular in this view are complementary. John Dunne puts it this way. A genuine sense of the sacred involves a 'passing over...a shifting of standpoint' which can open a way into the standpoint of another culture or another religion. In turn it can be followed by an equal and opposite process we might call coming back, coming back to new insights into one's culture, one's own way of life, one's own religion'.²⁹ That surely is the basis for a multicultural society, a society for the future.

ENDNOTES

¹ Turner, Ian (ed.) 1968, *The Australian Dream*, Melbourne, Sun Books, p. x.

² James, William 1957, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*, New York, Collier, p. 51.

³ Turner, 1968, p. x.

⁴ Grattan, Michelle (ed.) 2000, *Reconciliation: Essays on Australian Reconciliation*, Melbourne, Black Inc., p. 278.

- ⁵ Strelein, Lisa 2000, 'Dealing With Unfinished Business: A Treaty For Australia', *Public Law Review*, vol. 11, no. 4, p. 262.
- ⁶ Kohler, Lotte and Hans Saner 1992, *Correspondence Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers 1926-1969*, New York, Harcourt Brace, p. 149.
- ⁷ Susin, Luiz Carlos 2000/2, 'A Critique Of The Identity Paradigm', *Concilium*, pp. 79-80.
- ⁸ Susin, 2000/2, p. 80
- ⁹ Turner, 1968, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean 1990, *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968-1983*, Sydney, Pluto Press, p. 63.
- ¹¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1974, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 114, 48e.
- ¹² Mellick, J. D. S. 1982, *Portable Australian Authors: Henry Kingsley*, St. Lucia, Queensland University Press, pp. 202-3.
- ¹³ Metz, Johan Baptist, 1980, *Faith in History and Society*, New York, Seabury Press, p. 114.
- ¹⁴ Metz, 1980, pp. 112-3.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Sellick, R. G. 2002, *Venus In Transit: Australian Women Travellers, 1788-1930*, Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, pp. 123-4.
- ¹⁶ Caputo, John 1997, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, p. 57.
- ¹⁷ Finch, Henry Leroy 2001, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, New York, Continuum, p. 84.
- ¹⁸ Barnes, John (ed.) 1981, *Portable Australian Authors: Joseph Furphy*. St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, p. 65.
- ¹⁹ Turner, 1968, p. 102.
- ²⁰ Eliade, Mircea 1974, *The Myth Of The Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos And History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 10.
- ²¹ James, William 1979, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, p. 17.
- ²² Eliade, 1974, p. 153.
- ²³ James, 1957, p. 35.
- ²⁴ Baudrillard, 1990, p. 63.
- ²⁵ James, 1979, p. 163.
- ²⁶ Gelder, Ken and Jane M. Jacobs 1998, *Uncanny Australia*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, p. xi.
- ²⁷ Gelder and Jacobs, 1998, p. 1.
- ²⁸ Wright, Stephen and Jean Saye-Adams 2000, *Sacred Space*, London, Harcourt, p. 25.
- ²⁹ Dunne, John 1978, *The Way Of All The Earth*, South Bend Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, p. 56.