“Set pools of silence in this thirsty land”: Developing Retreat ministry in the Australian landscape

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Abstract

‘Set pools of silence in this thirsty land’:
Developing Retreat ministry in the Australian landscape

This study on the development of Retreat ministry in the Australian landscape is about the very physicality of the created and ever-evolving landscape of deserts, mountains, and lush coastal fringes, which invite exploration of their outer terrain, even while we seek our bearings for the inner journey of the Spirit. It is about the specific opportunities provided by spiritual Retreats to begin to unlock and celebrate some of the mysteries of the presence of the Incarnate Word in this land, centred on and empowered by God’s unconditional Love.
Chapter 1

“Set pools of silence in this thirsty land”:
An introduction

…Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, men who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,
It works unseen like radium in the dark,
And next to prayer, the outward works of grace:
Humility that takes the lower place,
Serene content that does not ask for more,
And simple joy, the treasure of the poor,
And active charity that knocks on any door…

Open, eyes of the heart, begin to see
The tranquil, vast, created mystery,
In all its courts of being laid awake,
Flooded with uncreated light for mercy’s sake…. 1

--James McAuley

1.1 Setting the scene

These evocative lines from James McAuley’s “Letter to John Dryden” have journeyed with me for a decade or more: as I began to lead a series of annual retreats “Under the Southern Cross” and in the Bass Strait Islands, and at the same time fulfilled a ministry role of vocational and formational support for Uniting Church clergy in Victoria, then ecumenically, as Christian leaders worked with the stresses, strains, challenges and joys of their calling. McAuley’s phrase links the notion of contemplative silence and stillness, and deep reflective listening prayer that “works unseen like radium in the dark”, to touch the thirsts of this country ---drought: literal, and metaphoric, in the human spirit. The petition is placed squarely within the context of the stark aridity of so much of the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit, and speaks perhaps even more directly to us in the early twenty-first century than when McAuley wrote it about 40 years ago. But here is the nexus of challenge and opportunity for an approach to the ministry of Retreat leadership in this
country, deeply earthed in the very nature of the land itself, as well as responsive to the spiritual needs and searchings of people of all ages and faith backgrounds, or none.

The key line of the poem, taken as the thesis title here, resonates too with Deborah Bird Rose’s notion of “nourishing terrain” which is her definition of Aboriginal “country”. She quotes from “The Bulbul bird”, a song-poem from the Pilbara in Western Australia:

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“Bulbul is here
Follow the stony creek, your track to northern shores!
Bulbul is here
This pool is ‘water throughout the year’
Stir my heart and also give rest.”
```

“Water throughout the year” is a both description and a placename. As songline, the words are both outer and inner maps, evoking the need of water and the yearning for rest --- reflections, if in a different mirror, of “pools of silence in a thirsty land”.

McAuley [1917-1976], a Catholic, political activist, and first editor of the conservative literary journal Quadrant, brought both intellect and a Christian faith stance to the self-conscious lucidity –and nationalism-- of his poetry. A stanza from McAuley’s poem “The seven days of creation: for Leonard French” further conveys his contemplative linking of prayer and the wonder of creation:

```
“The seventh day
Stillness is highest act,
Therefore be still and know
The pattern in the flow,
The reason in the fact.

Sabbath of the mind:
The beaked implacable
Tearing of the will
 Arrested and defined.

Not to need either
To kill or to possess
Is a day’s clear weather.

The grinding stops; we untether
The abused beast, and confess
We’ve heard of happiness.”
```

The distant echo of God’s “It is very good” touches the heart of even this solitary human creation in the antipodes, one who knows deeply the call to the creative stillness of Sabbath rest, and its bounty in reason, will and simple joy in life. The dedication of the poem suggests that McAuley was moved by the artist’s work. Leonard French’s abstract series, in turn, convey a deep contemplative glow in their visual evocation of creation. Fittingly, the
painting of the Seventh Day, on hessian on a hardboard circle of 4.3 metres diameter, is a great climax to the series, where “all the days become one, and everything was alive on the earth” [see Fig.1.1 following]. The biblical referent is Genesis 2:1-3, but cross and circles interplay as powerful symbols of both completion and the cruciform blessing of all that is. The painting has something of the complexity and intricacy, but a greater visual boldness, in comparison with the Celtic Wheel of Creation, which similarly assumes that the spiritual encompasses all of life. In both instances, the wheel motif suggests wholeness and completeness, literally roundedness, while acknowledging the rich diversity of life. Like the whole of French’s series, the Seventh Day is dominated by the rich browns and reds, the drab olive greens of the Australian artist’s palette. There is darkness as well as light, a central cross as well as teeming life, but, as the curator put it, here is a “dance, symphony, a hymn of praise, and Easter Exultet”. There is in God’s good creation light for dark places, and water for thirsty ones.

Judith Wright is another poet of the Australian landscape, and one who well demonstrates both a poetics and a theology of creation: God’s “Let there be light” links naming, and calling into being, as the essence of Earth’s [and cosmic] creation; just so, the poet’s struggle to name and call into being the wisdom of deep connectedness between place and the Creator of all that is. Language is the poet’s creative tool, as it is in Logos [John 1:1], as it must be for the theo-logian. The shaping power of language constructs the world we inhabit, and can be read in the oral history behind Genesis 1-2, the pages of the geological record, the growth rings of an ancient river red gum, the depths of theological reflection, and diverse artistic evocations.

From her collection “Notes at edge” Wright has a personal and contemplative stanza 2, “Rock”:

“I dug from this shallow soil
A rock-lump square as a book,
Split into leaves of clay.
A long curved wash of ripple
Left there its fingerprint
One long-before-time lost day.

I turn a dead sea’s leaves,
Stand on a shore of waves,
And touch that day, and look.”

She acknowledges the tentativeness of her search and naming, it is but “shallow soil”, but in the next two lines we have, so briefly stated, images of rock, scripture, the clay of human origins, and the invitation to read the story hidden in the leaves of the book of creation. The “long curved wash of ripple” reminds me that I have my own chunk of metamorphosed red sandstone from the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, with its 500 million-year old ripples of a vast inland sea --- to me a symbol both of the rock-solidity of creation and faith, and also of the evolutionary fingerprints of upheaval and
Fig.1.1  Leonard French, “The seventh day”, 1964-65.
Enamel on hessian-covered hardboard, diameter 430 cms.
Crumlin, 1989, plate 83, 175.
Note: due to size of scanner, picture is incomplete on left side.
change within the all-encompassing sense of God’s continuing loving care for Earth. In the exterior world of landscape we can “touch that day” of creation, “and look” at one’s own interior landscape where the Creator continues present and active. There is a wonderful dialectic here between self and Other, the physical and the emotional-spiritual, the outward apprehension and the inward reflection.

Wright’s image of digging, discovery and contemplative response reminds me of the parable of the hidden treasure [Mt. 13:44, RSV]: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field”. The typical hermeneutic would focus on the gospel as the treasure for which one should forsake all, or perhaps see the “discoverer” as Christ himself, the one willing to sacrifice all that he had to purchase new life for all. But what if we were to understand the discovery and eventual digging-up as an epiphany-revelation of Earth? What if we were to see the field, the landscape, as encapsulating a hidden dimension of the good news of God’s creation? What if the treasure was not some separate “pot of gold” but creation itself, and God’s revelation within and emanating from it?

In human humility, we may struggle to acknowledge and accept what faith teaches, that the treasure is to be found within each individual, as they search their heart and listen for the stirrings of the Spirit — traditional material for reflection on Retreat! But what if, in “ecological humility”, the treasure is also to be found within, within landscape in all its diversities, from desert to sea, from mountain to city streets? Human responses to landscape, exclamation at its beauty or terror, its productivity or degradation, the impact of restoring or polluting it, these actions and perceptions, well-intentioned or misguided, they are not separate from but integral to all the complex biotic interactions on this planet, “even as the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now”, waiting “with eager longing” [Rom. 8:22, RSV]. How might this be explored on Retreat, in a specific geographic setting, with the invitation to explore connections with geomorphology or the aesthetics of landscape, biblical themes, present day problems of land use, justice issues in resource utilisation, or eco-spirituality, and each or all from a contemplative stance? Here are some of the issues to be explored in this study.

The formational processes and interconnections signalled ever so briefly above in poetry, art and biblical reflection, find echoes in the ecotheological work of Moltmann, Edwards, Ruether, Santmire, Leal and others, approaches which cannot be developed within the space constraints of this study. The Trinitarian perichoresis is my theological lens of choice in this enterprise. The Greek term goes back at least to John of Damascus in the seventh century, and refers to the dynamic “dance” of the three Persons in relation to each other. The intimate, intertwined and kenotic mutual self-giving of Creator, Son and Spirit, to me, require a theology of unbounded loving relationship and an ethic of care for all creation. As Moltmann puts it, “Following Johannine theology, we are taking as archetype of all the relationships in creation and redemption that correspond to God, the reciprocal perichoresis of the Father and the Son and the Spirit [John 17:21]... We are assuming a unity of divine
love in the Trinity… ‘Creation in the Spirit of God’ is an understanding which does not merely set creation over against God. It also simultaneously takes creation into God, though without divinising it. In the creative and life-giving powers of the Spirit, God pervades his creation. In his Sabbath rest he allows his creation to exert an influence on him. From the aspect of the Spirit in creation, the relationship of God and the world must also be viewed as a perichoretic relationship.”

In an earlier chapter in *God in creation* 11 Moltmann notes that “The created world does not exist in ‘the absolute space’ of the divine Being; it exists in the space God yielded up for it through his creative resolve. The world does not exist in itself. It exists in ‘the ceded space’ of God’s world presence….In the doctrine about the world as God’s creation we… distinguish between three things: first, the essential omnipresence of God, or absolute space; second, the space of creation in the world-presence of God conceded to it; and third, relative places, relationships and movements in the created world. The space of the world corresponds to God’s world-presence, which initiates this space, limits it and interpenetrates it”.

The very being of God is constituted in the perichoretic dance, both within the Trinity, and in relationship with creation, cosmic and local, creaturely and earthed in landscape, and in the very matrix of Earth’s structure and life-processes. Or as Edwards puts it in *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 12 “In my view rocks, mountain ranges, forests and ecosystems are not simply aggregates of creatures which have intrinsic value, but they also have intrinsic value [in aggregate] in themselves because they are modes of divine presence and the expression of ‘trinitarian fruitfulness’”. As Edwards further notes, this goes beyond the process theologians like Cobb and Birch who conclude that only feeling and consciousness confer intrinsic ethical value ---for Edwards, even rock, with all its minerals, molecules, atoms and electrons has intrinsic value because here too is divine self-expression in action.

John O’Donohue, philosophical theologian and poet, draws together some of these strands for me as he writes in *Divine beauty*: 13 “Millions of years before us the earth lived in wild elegance. Landscape is the first-born of creation. Sculpted with huge patience over millennia, landscape has enormous diversity of shape, presence and memory. There is poignancy in beholding the beauty of landscape: often it feels as though it has been waiting for centuries for the recognition and witness of the human eye”. He laments that Earth has become reduced to an intense but transient and generally overlooked foreground, and that we have “unlearned the patience and attention of lingering at the thresholds where the unknown awaits us”, maybe because “wild landscapes remind us of the unsearched territories of the mind”.

Perhaps in the invitation to contemplative reflection on Retreat, one might find it possible to re-engage with the “ancient rhythms of the earth [which] have insinuated themselves into the rhythms of the human heart. The earth is not outside us; it is within: the clay from where the tree of the body grows. …Nothing can separate us from the vigour and vibrancy of this inheritance. In contrast to our frenetic, saturated lives, the earth offers a calming
stillness….something in our clay nature…needs to continually experience this ancient, outer ease of the world. It helps us remember who we are and why we are here.”  

Or as Paul put it, nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ [Rom. 8:39, RSV] --- precisely because in God we are integral to, immersed in, inextricably intertwined with, that element of cosmic creation which is Earth, where we humans share our habitation in the here and now of life.

This study on the development of Retreat ministry in the Australian landscape is about the place of “ceaseless prayer”, about ceaseless prayer in particular places; it is about the “evanescent sense” of searching contemplation, and the reaching of “the eyes of the heart” into the “created mystery” that is the presence of God in the land of Australia. It is about the very physicality of the created and ever-evolving landscape, drought-ridden, flood-prone, bushfire destroyed and regenerated, the “sunburnt country” of deserts, mountains, and lush coastal fringes, the bustling cities of opportunities gained or lost, which individually and collectively invite exploration of their outer terrain, even while we just as hesitantly seek our bearings for the inner journeys of the Spirit. And it is about the specific (loosely) structured opportunities provided by spiritual Retreats in the Christian tradition to begin to unlock and celebrate some of the mysteries of the presence of the Incarnate Word in this land, as faithful searchers test for themselves the “highest act” of stillness, and seek to “walk within the fire” of prayerful silence, reflection, and prayer, and then seek to respond in “outward works of grace” as they return to the ordinariness of everyday life, but empowered in new ways to live out that “impetuous desire” centred on and empowered by God’s unconditional Love.

1.2 Methodology

The basic methodology of this study is a reading of and reflection on sources in the Christian tradition which relate to prayer, the “going aside” for intentionally structured times of Retreat, and on theological, biblical, artistic and literary resources which relate to particular Australian landscape realms. The study is literary and reflective, rather than experiential in the sense of gathering data from specific Retreat programs or participating retreatants. It has however, grown out of the writer’s own experience of participating in, planning, and leading retreats, especially “wilderness retreats”, over nearly 25 years.

The study also builds on the writer’s extensive ecumenical involvement in training for and the offering of one-to-one spiritual direction over a similar period and more intensively since 1990, following receipt of a Crestonby Fellowship to study spiritual direction and Retreat leadership in Britain and Switzerland. The writer is now involved nationally with the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction [a support and training network], and the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction [developing formation standards and a code of ethics covering all training programs for spiritual directors in Australia].

Out of these experiences, the present study provides a timely opportunity to draw together some learnings and insights, priorities and questions, especially
in the context of the Australian physical landscape [rather than buildings such as retreat centres and monasteries] and to identify some parameters and challenges for the further development of this ministry and its leadership.

1.3 An outline of the study

Chapter 2 briefly explores some of the traditions and recent changes in the structure and purposes of Retreats, offers a general process model, and indicates the particular contributions of theological reflection and spiritual companionsing [spiritual direction]. The intention here, and in each chapter, is to highlight implications for the further development of the ministry.

Chapter 3 takes up the subject of spirituality and spiritual formation, seeks to clarify these terms and an understanding of rites of passage and pilgrimage within them, and then outlines a process model of spiritual formation that offers insights into the rhythms and processes of Retreats. A summary ‘map’ of patterns of spirituality is then outlined, as a tool for retreat leaders. Finally, an Aboriginal Christian approach to prayer known as dadirri contemplation is presented within the context of a summary of recent work on Australian contextual theologies and the development of Retreats within the Australian natural landscape. It is argued that the notion of dadirri contemplation is an appropriate and helpful way to link a contribution of indigenous spirituality to non-indigenous theologies, and to a prayerful openness in Retreat encounters with the Spirit of God in this land.

Chapter 4 [a case study of coastline landscapes] and Chapter 5 [desert and river landscapes] are the hub of the study, as they outline and illustrate resources and insights for Retreat ministry in specific physical landscape realms in Australia: what biblical, literary, artistic, and theological resources might we bring to bear in a dadirri-contemplative approach to specific Retreat settings, on the coast, in the outback, in the bush or mountain terrain, on a river, or in the “wilderness landscape” that is the Australian city? And what added dimensions might there be in any of these settings if we take account of the impact or threat of natural hazards such as tsunamis, floods, bushfires, salinity, and drought? The theological issue of theodicy is addressed particularly in Chapter 4. In what ways can we encounter the presence of God in each of these settings? Does the geographical setting in fact make a difference to a Retreat experience, and how might it enrich the spiritual formation and ongoing faith journey of the retreatant? In what way can the particular physical setting of a Retreat offer a “nourishing terrain” to a retreatant?

Chapter 6 draws together the more important strands emerging from Chapters 4-5 in particular, offer some concise theological reflection on the discourse, and summarises both learnings and challenges arising from the study as a contribution to the ongoing education of the community of Australian spiritual directors and retreat leaders. Areas for further research and writing will be noted, especially those beyond the scope of the present strictly limited study, including other landscape realms, such as the city and small town environments; and some of the philosophical and theological notions connected with symbolic landscapes, sense of place, the language of sacred
space and holy place, the critical issues of Incarnation in relation to creation and our images of God, and recent developments in the related enterprises or sub-disciplines of ecotheology and ecospirituality.
Endnotes: Chapter 1


2 Deborah Bird Rose, 1996, _Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness_, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra. The Bulbul bird is identified as the coucal pheasant, which is also a Dreaming figure of the Pilbara people, _idem_, 8.

3 McAuley’s collected works are currently out of print; this stanza is quoted from a web site source: [http://www.physics.usyd.edu.au/~kiran/McAuley.html](http://www.physics.usyd.edu.au/~kiran/McAuley.html), page 34 of 184.

4 Completed 1964-65 and now placed in the Australian National University, Canberra; see Rosemary Crumlin [ed.], _Images of religion in Australian art_, 1989, Bay Books, Kensington, NSW, 162-174.

5 Elaine Gill and David Everett, 1997, _Celtic pilgrimages: Sites, seasons and saints: An inspiration for spiritual journeys_, Blandford/Cassell, London, 7 [illustrated by Courtney Davis].

6 _Idem_, 174.

7 Judith Wright, 1990, _A human pattern: Selected poems_, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 231f.


9 On the great prayer of John 17, see Dorothy Lee, 2002, _Flesh and glory: Symbolism, gender and theology in the Gospel of John_, Herder and Herder, New York, 121: “the language here is performative: the prayer is a visualisation, an enactment, a “performance” of the perichoretic relationship between Father and Son…a continuous circle of intimacy… the imprint of the divine, internal relationship within human history in archetypal ways that are definitive for human identity as much as divine…and [quoting Dodd] ‘The love of God, thus released in history, brings men [and women] into the same unity of which the relation of the Father and Son is the eternal archetype’”. To this I would want to add that Earth, in all its physicality, is also brought into this same eternal unity of its triune creator. On perichoresis, literally “the dance around” of the Trinity, see Brian Wren, 1989, _What language shall I borrow? God-talk in worship: A male response to feminist theology_, Crossroad, New York, 119-120, 202; and Alistair E McGrath, 1999, _Christian spirituality: An invitation_, Blackwell, Oxford, 50. On the Trinity, creation, and redemption, see Colin Gunton, 1998, _The Triune creator_, Eerdmans, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh; Sallie McFague, 2000, _Life abundant_, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.


11 _Idem_, 156f.


14 _Idem_.

159x708] 184, 166-174.

7 Deborah Bird Rose, 1996, _Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness_, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra. The Bulbul bird is identified as the coucal pheasant, which is also a Dreaming figure of the Pilbara people, _idem_, 8.

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11 _Idem_, 156f.


14 _Idem_.

10
Chapter 2
Retreat Ministry: Discovering the concrete meaning of Love

Prayer is like watching for the Kingfisher. All you can do is Be there where he is likely to appear, and Wait. Often, nothing much happens; There is space, silence, and Expectancy. No visible sign, only the Knowledge that he’s been there, And may come again. Seeing or not seeing cease to matter, You have been prepared. But sometimes, when you’ve almost Stopped expecting it, A flash of brightness Gives encouragement. --Ann Lewin

Introduction
Retreat ministry is about encouraging watchful, expectant, contemplative waiting for the “flash of brightness” that is an experience of God’s Love in the here and now of one’s life. The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the key ministry skills, assumptions and expectations that contribute to Retreat ministry and experience, and in particular:

1. My own personal assumptions, based on experiencing and leading Retreats over the past 25 years;
2. A brief introduction to the origins and development of Retreat ministry, especially from a Protestant Reformed perspective;
3. An explication of five dimensions of prayer which I understand to be the core offering of Retreat leaders to participants;
4. A similar explication of the nature and role of theological reflection for the evolving Retreat experience, as a significant contribution to the processes of prayerful discernment and personal decision-making which are a typical [though not mandatory] outcome of a Retreat experience;
5. The particular role of the Retreat leader as spiritual companion to the retreatant, and the theological underpinnings of this role as a pointer.
to the presence of Christ in the active and constant work of the Holy Spirit in the retreatant’s life and prayer; and

6. The compilation of a visual/verbal process model of Retreat ministry, highlighting the essential elements of the ministry identified in this chapter.

My working definition of a Retreat is “an intentional taking of time, apart from the busy-ness of life, in order to attend more deeply to the movements and call of the Holy Spirit, towards living the concrete meaning of Love with the whole of one’s life, and to do this especially through opportunities for inner stillness, contemplative prayer, and guided reflection.” Retreat ministry then is the provision of a supportive environment, physical, spiritual and relational, in which the intentions of the individual or group Retreat may best be enhanced and fulfilled. The role of a Retreat leader and spiritual companion is to support the retreatant in his or her intentions and desires, but “achievement” of these is not finally the leader’s responsibility: “Outcomes” are the work of the God of Love, through the Holy Spirit’s working in the life of the individual, and are to be discerned, celebrated, and taken into the next phase of life as both graces, and challenges, for further integration and spiritual development.

Some of my assumptions about Retreats and the ministry which seeks to enhance them are as follows: First, they have a Christian biblical and theological basis [there are other kinds of retreat]. Second, retreatants come with a God-given intention to pray, reflect, “discern the spirits”, and to seek creative ways of articulating where and how the Spirit seems to be drawing them at this time, towards discovering some aspect of the concrete meaning of Love. It is important for individuals to give some shape in their minds, and have an invitation to put into words, their specific intentions and hopes for the Retreat, perhaps especially if they enrol for a certain theme or leadership, and allow themselves to avoid engagement at any deep level. Third, a minimum of three to five days seems to be necessary [and longer if possible and appropriate], in order for retreatants to settle in to a new environment, catch up on sleep, consciously choose to put “home agendas” aside, and begin to give themselves deeply to prayer. Fourth, a simple but comfortable physical setting is conducive, as is a modest framework of morning and evening prayer with a group or community, or at least with the Retreat leader; the provision of a daily Eucharist, or at least on the first and last days, seeks to ground the whole experience sacramentally in the presence of the crucified risen Christ who calls us constantly to new and abundant living. Fifth, a daily conversation with the Retreat leader is usually helpful in giving the retreatants an opportunity to articulate what is happening for them, to do so outside their own head/heart, and also for the opportunity this provides for the offer of further ways of prayer and reflection, recognising and working with blockages, and perhaps suggesting further resources for reading, reflection, modes of creative expression, and taking into the next prayer time. Sixth, in the context of this study, the choice of location, and ways of accessing and immersing the Retreat experience in a specific landscape, will retain the intention and integrity of the Retreat in so far as they contribute to attending to the Spirit’s movements and call in general in one’s life, with likely nuancing and particular responses deriving from the discovery of the numinous in this space and time. And seventh, a Retreat is about a personal, but never a solely private, experience: the prayerful intention is to address whatever the Spirit is drawing attention to within the whole of one’s life context, including one’s relationships with self, with others, with God, and with one’s physical/social environment. If the Incarnation means anything to the Christian life, it is not about a privatised faith and life, but one lived with Christ in the world, with and for others.
None of the above assumptions should be read as modifying, but rather seeking to enhance, the core intention of a Retreat, of being with God in outer silence and inner stillness, for the sake of one’s unfolding life in the world. “Retreat” is not about escapism and avoidance, but rather a desire to face the facts of one’s life, and to address the reality rather than the fantasy, and this in a wider culture that often can seem to pander to unreality, consumerism, and other unedifying priorities. One thinks of Augustine’s “you made us for yourself [Lord] and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you”, or more humourously, though still profoundly, Michael Leunig’s Mr Curly correspondence on being rest-less. The world contributes profoundly to the restlessness of modern Western humans, but there is also in a sense a divine restlessness which calls us to search out our own answers to Jesus’ question “What do you seek?”, what are your deepest desires, how can we uncover and honour these as we walk together? [John 1:35-39]; we might note that the disciples sought to escape that searching question and instead asked Jesus where he was staying, rather than risk attending to his provocative but spirited invitation! A Retreat is about putting the human restlessness to rest, and being able to focus on the purpose of its divine counterpart.

If the retreatant is to find God in all things, she/he must find God first within the self, in dark places as well as in light ones, face their fears, and follow the sometimes veiled or cryptic thread to new life in Christ. There are distractions to be recognised and put aside, illusions to be dealt with, and encrustations of false humility, low self-esteem, suppressed anger and other troubles of the psyche, to be brought under the sifting and healing processes of the Spirit of God. No one Retreat experience is likely to address all such issues, which may be an argument for at least annual Retreats, with a sequential personal agenda. It is also an argument for recognising that what a Retreat offers is a modelling of the why and how of bringing one’s life prayerfully to God every day, every week, every month, perhaps with the parallel ministry of spiritual direction, or the regular support of a soul-friend, prayer partner or prayer group: such are the gifts of Christian community.

2.1 Origins in the tradition
It will be clear that the definitions and assumptions above are personal ones, yet I believe they are broadly true to the basic history of Christian Retreats, however varied over time, and across cultures and religious traditions. The notion of going aside for prayer is very much a biblical one, and the most frequently quoted model is the way in which the Holy Spirit drew Jesus away into the wilderness for 40 days of prayer, fasting, and wrestling with the nature of the person he was called to be, and the nature of the life/ministry he was to fulfil [Matthew 4:1-11, and parallels]. At other times and places Jesus was consistent in giving priority to prayerful listening and wholehearted commitment to the way ahead. Again and again we read accounts such as Mark 1:35: “In the morning while it was still dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed”. In our piety we may want to call that morning prayer or personal devotions or a quiet time with God, rather than a Retreat, but the principle is established in the life of Jesus that there is a need, and enormous benefit, to withdraw from interruptions “for a season” so that we can give God our full and undivided attention. This deep attending and listening is an essential part of any loving relationship, Christ’s friendship with us most of all.

Jesus frequently drew his disciples aside in community to teach and encourage them, and to model for them the necessity of prayerful discernment of God’s way ahead for them, so that they would not constantly be overcome by the temptation to move forward
in their own strength alone. The disciples accepted the need to go aside from their families and everyday demands on them, for teaching and counsel, not to mention their “supervised field experience” in ministry as they travelled the roads with their Lord!

A later chapter will look at the desert landscape as one locus of contemporary Retreat experience, but in Hebrew and Christian scriptures the desert is a remote and lonely place of danger, of testing and temptation, and also a place where human identity is established and God’s call is heard in new ways, struggled with, and confirmed. The desert symbolised the stripping-away of non-essentials, in a stark physical and spiritual landscape where the few landmarks are to be God-given out of venturing in faith and trust. The wilderness also drew the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the first few centuries of the Christian era ⁷, people like Antony of Egypt [d. 356].

Here was modelled a spiritual search and village-pedagogy which later took on a more communal form in the monasteries of the Middle Ages and beyond.⁸ Formally organised Retreats per se seem to have awaited the Counter-Reformation era, and especially the writings and practice of Ignatius of Loyola [1491-1556].⁹ Ignatian “Spiritual Exercises” provide a structured outline for a Retreat program, based on scriptural passages, searching questions, and a progressive deepening of one’s listening to God in scripture and in personal prayer.

In what ways might Protestant/Reformed traditions in Retreat leadership, albeit much more recent innovations than the Ignatian Exercises, differ in their emphases and approach? One form of answer comes in the work of Frank Senn.¹⁰ He defines spirituality as having “to do with one’s relationship with God, with the way in which that relationship is conceived and expressed…..If one conceives of God as being “just” or “sovereign”, then the way in which one conceives of one’s relationship with God might be defined in terms of “justification” [Luther] or “obedience” [Calvin]”.

Senn takes up the symbols for two different strands of biblical tradition used by Leenhardt ¹¹: The Abrahamic or Protestant strand, as he links them, is traced from Abraham through the prophets of Israel to Paul and the Reformers; the symbol suggested is “the Word”. The Mosaic or Catholic strand is traced from Moses through the priesthood of Israel to Peter and the papacy, and the suggested symbol is the “burning bush”. While both Catholic and Protestant/Reformed traditions affirm that Christian spirituality embraces the whole of life, the former places more emphasis on our human efforts towards God, and the latter on God’s justifying mercy which is the first work of saving grace. For the Catholic, forgiveness may only be realised fully at the end, while for Protestant Evangelicals at least, all starts with the joyful experience of sins forgiven now. For Senn and Leenhardt the relevant differences lie in the Protestant priority on the Word, justification by faith alone, unmediated access to God in prayer, and a different [less authoritarian?] theology of priesthood, ritual acts and sacraments. Both traditions, especially since the 1960s and Vatican II, give high priority to the study of and reflection on scripture, and both are experiencing ongoing innovation in liturgy and music which, as may be expected, is contributing to the richness of Retreat experiences [for those helped by such diverse and creative input ---others want more solitude and silence!]. It would be wrong to exaggerate the differences noted however, as Christian theology, spirituality and liturgy are far from static or mono-cultural – interaction and synthesis is happening on many fronts, as would be expected of a living and organic faith, whatever its ecclesial origins. But there are also continuing dangers of confused syncretism [Gospel and culture, and inter-faith issues], and of pietistic and spiritualised sentimentality [Retreat experiences disconnected from sound biblical and
theological reflection, and without the accountability of scholarship and an authentic charism of spiritual guidance].

Reuben Job draws on the Methodist tradition in his various writings, including A guide to retreat. His introductory chapter commences with a quotation from Evelyn Underhill: “The water for which we thirst is God’s grace, but God gives us the job of hauling it in our own buckets”. Job goes on to outline the nature of a Retreat designed to lead the retreatant “more effectively Godward”, and he lists some 15 characteristics: prayer for guidance and God’s intervention in your life; silent listening, with note pad, for at least 30 minutes, praying “come Holy Spirit”; reading a scripture passage several times: “what is God saying to me?”, noting feelings, questions, affirmations, awareness of direction; spiritual reading, using one or more essays in the anthology appended to his book; an hour for slow, reflective reading, perhaps of only a paragraph “if God’s voice apprehends you” there; reflection: note common themes from praying, listening and reading – one hour; mealtime: light nutritious food received with a thankful heart; rest, which is often much needed as people arrive on retreat, from busy lives; recreation: if possible outdoors to walk, jog, swim, garden etc.; journaling: at least an hour allowed to record the movements of the Retreat day; prayer: adoration, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, abandonment to God’s care, thus allowing time for God to lead us in prayer when we do not know how [Rom 8:26]; further spiritual reading, reflection, journaling; Eucharist, “singularly formative and renewing” on Retreat; response: a time to focus and gather together all that has been happening in this time apart, perhaps in written prayer, a rule of life, renewed commitment; returning to the world: considering re-entry steps, moving towards maturity in Christ; and closing prayer: thanksgiving, petition, commitment as one returns to the demands and opportunities of life and ministry.

I have included this outline in some detail, as it demonstrates that there is a clear expectation that many different spiritual disciplines will contribute to the retreatant’s formation during the experience. My own critique is that the day looks far too busy and crammed with “good works” rather than “deep listening” and contemplative waiting. Despite good intentions, there is a danger of more “doing” than learning to “just be”. If the 15 suggested components could be laid across a 3-5 day period, I would have less of a sense of pressure to “achieve” the fullness of such a compendium of spiritual disciplines. Nevertheless, we have here a significant model. from the Protestant/Reformed perspective of the modern Retreat movement.

One other model is instructive and has its background in the work of Quaker author Richard Foster. In Wilderness time, Emilie Griffin has taken Foster’s 12 spiritual disciplines and developed a “gentle guide for retreat” in book format. The themes evolve as follows:

Retreating inwardly, practising the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and study;
Retreating outwardly, practising the disciplines of simplicity, solitude, submission, and service;
Retreating corporately, practising the disciplines of confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

As with Job’s Retreat model, the emphasis is on a range of spiritual disciplines, developing some significant themes for spiritual growth, and less on a sequential “build-up” characteristic of the Ignatian Exercises. Clearly both have their own strengths, and Job’s and Griffin’s models do not require the substantial commitment of time required for the Exercises, 3-5 days compared to 30-days [though the latter have been modified and abbreviated in various ways in recent decades].
2.2 Trends and developments
The Jesuits were the first to require their members to participate regularly in Retreats, and in the early seventeenth century lay Catholics were also encouraged to participate by Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul and others. The first purpose-built Retreat houses were erected in the seventeenth century, with “conductors” for those who came, but the practice did not become widespread even in the Roman Catholic Church until the nineteenth century. The Oxford Movement fostered the growth of Retreat-giving in the Church of England from about 1856, in Kent and Oxford. The twentieth century saw a proliferation of Retreat centres of many kinds, and programs of many types. The so-called “preached” [Catholic] or “conducted” [Anglican] Retreats became common, with addresses given to groups of retreatants, and an emphasis on communal silence.

The next twentieth century development was of the one-to-one or “Individually Guided” Retreat, recognising the growing demand for individuals to have access to the Retreat experience, and thereby placing an onus on churches to provide a reservoir of Retreat leaders and spiritual directors to service this demand. Internationally, the trend has been first, a proliferation across Christian denominations; and second, an increasing level of ecumenical integration and promotion of programs and leadership training.

In Australia and New Zealand, growth has occurred particularly in the past 25 years, for example through Spiritual Growth Ministries [ecumenical, New Zealand], the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction and other more-denominationally based bodies here, and the offering of Retreat programs, for example in Melbourne alone, in initiatives such as the Heart of Life Spirituality Centre [Catholic], Wellspring [Baptist], Campion [Jesuit], the Living Well [Anglican], the Uniting Church [Pallotti and Otira], and many others –-but with participants and leaders coming from diverse church backgrounds in each case.

The issues that appear to be high on the agenda for Retreat leadership today include: First, recognising the place of discernment as charism, not solely pastoral technique; second, addressing the re-engagement issues of retreatants returning home “to make a difference” in their own lives and for others; third, the relevance of the choice of Retreat themes and locations in a rapidly changing but spiritually-searching culture; and fourth, the training of Retreat leaders, increasingly lay, male and female, and not necessarily with the same biblical/theological grounding as clergy [though this too is changing].

One way of summarising some of the changes and diversity of Retreats being offered today is to note that the relative place of contemplative stillness and silence now varies considerably, even within the confines of a specific Retreat program, depending on the particular theme and style of Retreat. For example, the range of possibilities for silent prayer is illustrated in Fig.2.1 below; conversely, the contribution of music, liturgical and other creative elements may “increase” as the proportion of silent time is “reduced”:

![Fig. 2.1. The relative place of silence in different Retreat settings.](image-url)
The Retreat model, whatever changes may be underway, must remain a clearing in the jungle of life, so that that very “jungle” can be seen in perspective, and its riches and joys can better be perceived, shared and celebrated, and the challenges and decisions one faces as Christian leader/disciple can be seen more with God’s eyes as an integral part of the whole of cosmic creation, sustained by the incarnating presence of the risen Christ, and blessed and unfolded by the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit.

Christian ‘Retreats’ offer a profound forward movement, literally a God-given opportunity to get in touch more deeply with the Spirit’s presence in our faith journey, in scripture, in creation around us, and in that still place within, the “personal sacred site” of the Kingdom of God. They provide an opportunity to better discern the movements of God in our lives. Retreats also invite us to better discern such movements within the shared life of the community of faith. Finally, Retreats seek to open ourselves to being renewed and refreshed for the demands of life in our hurting and broken world.

The key questions for retreatants remain

- Why have you come? For what do you yearn? What desires draw you here?
- What are you noticing of the Spirit’s movement or “nudging” in your life?
- What is happening in your praying? How might this be enhanced and deepened?
- Where does your prayer and reflection seem to be calling you next? How will your love of God contribute in new ways to expressing love of neighbour and world?

Such opportunities and focal questions have direct implications for the formation of Retreat leaders. These include the Retreat leader’s capacity for genuine pastoral hospitality for the one who comes; the leader’s prayerful preparation for the retreatant, before, during, and after the Retreat program, and for each encounter as spiritual companion; extended practice of empathic deep listening to the articulation of the Spirit’s movements in the retreatants’ lives, and a noticing but not engaging with their own responses to this articulation [material for the leader’s own supervision]; the ability not only to discern the Spirit’s movements, in conversation with the retreatant, but to encourage reflection and critique of these, to identify what is primary and more significant at the time; and the ability to maintain an integrity of purpose regarding the theme and purpose for which a retreatant has come, including the relative comfort of the domestic environment, the revelatory potential of the wider physical environment and its specific landscape, and an open sensitivity to the dynamics of the place/person/thematic/leadership mix.

In terms of “holding the ground” for the central core of the shared Retreat tradition, the following is one verse of a prayer for myself as Retreat leader, and for those who come seeking the concrete meaning of Love for their life:

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Holy Three, weave us together in harmony,
Plumb our depths and let us see;
Make us whole and set us free;
Weave us in Love with those whose pain we see”.
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The next three sections below will comment on essential components of the Retreat experience, as they contribute to the process model in section 2.6: this is not the place for a manual on prayer, theological reflection and spiritual companioning, but a signalling of some assumptions of the model.

2.3 The five dimensions of prayer
Gerry Hughes writes “No one is able to pray! Prayer is a surrender of our whole being to God, so that God may be the God of mercy and compassion to us and through us. Too much conscious effort can kill prayer! Prayer is about letting the Spirit of God pray in us…Prayer is about being still, so that we can become more perceptive and more responsive to God…” Heart speaks to heart”. Prayer too often can become formal, abstract and overly wordy, in public and in private, even as we remind ourselves of the injunction to “Be still, and know that I am God” [Ps 46:10]; of course the next psalm does go on to say “Clap your hands, all people! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!” [Ps 47:1]. Somewhere in this spectrum of response, there is the continuing human need to recapture the capacity to attend deeply to God who would speak to us in numinous silence, not just receive our words of thanks and many more of petition. Hence the dictum of Matthew 6:6-7, to pray in private rather than in public, to not “heap up empty phrases”, but to pray briefly and to the point, as illustrated in Jesus’ teaching [vv.8b-18].

If prayer is one of the essential modes of expressing our “spirituality”, our practical, day-to-day “practicing of the presence of God”, then it is equally an essential ingredient of the Retreat experience. From a Reformed perspective, spirituality was to do with the individual and communal response of believers to the gracious, unmerited activity of God as it impinged on the whole of one’s life. From this point of view organised Retreats per se were likely to be critiqued by a theology which emphasised engagement with rather than withdrawal from the world. But there has been a shift in practice, if not in basic theology, as it is recognised that a Retreat experience is all about connecting love of God and love of neighbour, and the humility of recognising God’s unconditional love impacting one’s life in the ordinariness of every day. Thomas Merton’s phrase “contemplation in a world of action” is a very Protestant/Reformed notion in seeking to hold the two strands in dialectical connection, rather than separating them. In Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, he notes that prayer is not a “superstitious observance of hours…we shall easily learn to persevere in prayer, and with suspended desires to wait patiently for the Lord…he is always near us…” As part of this perseverance and patient waiting in prayer, the Reformers were strong on the need for biblical reading and reflection, and taking time for prolonged and disciplined prayer and meditation. Richard Baxter imagined a ruminative way of praying. Martin Luther’s guidelines on prayer were written at the request of his barber who apparently asked, “How should I pray?” Just as a competent barber must concentrate his thoughts on the razor and avoid distractions, how much more, suggested Luther, must prayer possess the heart exclusively and completely if it is to be good prayer. He used the word Feuerzeug, used in modern German for cigarette lighter, to suggest that a chapter of scripture can act as a ‘lighter’ to the heart which desires to reach out to God in prayer.

Silent listening was an integral part of praying, and, as Luther, reveals, a part of his own prayerful study of scripture. The deep, meditative openness to noticing the movements of God in one’s life is a priceless pearl of our devotional heritage, and Luther offered three steps:

(1) meditatio, prayerful, thoughtful receptive listening to a short passage of scripture; praying in humility for enlightenment, guidance, and
understanding of the Holy Spirit, and to desire the real Master of the scripture himself;

(2) tentatio, the testing self-examination which is necessary as we are taken aside [Retreat is not mentioned !], searched, challenged, chastened, and brought to decision as a result of the deep meditation; There is a movement beyond the scripture passage, yet an owning of its impact and relevance for the here and now of one’s life ---how right, beautiful and comforting is God’s Word;

(3) oratio, the prayer that is a response to the Word of God which confronts the person. The psalmist David exulted that he would do nothing else, night and day, but write, speak, sing, hear, and read God’s word [Ps. 119}. Here is the joy of saturating oneself in the Word, feeding on it more than analysing it, and responding to it with heart, spirit, and intellect. The prayer may be vocal or silent, in adoration or confession, in petition or intercession, and is both a gift of God and to God. Here our most wordy prayers traditionally are to be found!

These dimensions of prayer suggest what it is to be the silent listener to the Word behind the words, and to respond in faith to the unmerited grace offered uniquely in Jesus Christ. In our idioms, prayer involves a putting aside of our own busy agendas, and a focussing on the One who speaks through all times, all places, and all relationships. For Luther there could be no unmediated contemplation of the divine nature ---“Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself” [Isaiah 45: 15], and there is no new life in Christ without a theology of the cross, where the incarnated One is also the crucified and risen One. Prayer, as part of life, must hold these strands together, or there is only the abstraction of a theology of glory.

Other individual writers and traditions have termed this approach to prayer lectio divina or sacred reading. Two further dimensions [rather than “steps”, as there need be no precise sequence] have been added:

(4) contemplatio, where the person at prayer is gently led by the Spirit to a place of rest in the presence of God, and a sense of ease and peace invites a simple loving attentiveness to God alone in the stillness. Psalm 19 has “The heavens telling the glory of God”, and yet there is also a time when “There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard”; similarly Psalm 139 speaks of God’s inescapable nearness, the One who is transcendent is nevertheless wherever we are. The crux of contemplation is, loving attention to God, in the midst of the Christian life.

(5) incarnatio, when, towards the end of a time of prayer or the close of a Retreat, the person’s attention is gradually drawn on to the next phase of their life, and the invitation to incarnate in their life the fruits of the gifts and graces of this time of attention to God. My understanding is that this is not a “returning home from an escape”, but an intentional carrying-forward and a continuing of the prayer/Retreat experience. One drew aside precisely in order to see one’s life more clearly under the Holy Spirit’s prompting, and now one moves on, carrying those new discernments and commitments as part of the whole, integrated process of life. Incarnational prayer carries the other dimensions with it into the next day’s ordinariness.

In summary, the five dimensions of prayer outlined above are integral, though of varying “weight”, to any Retreat experience. In the context of the present study, the material for meditation will be both biblical scriptures, and the “book” of creation, “the
second book of scripture” as it has been called since the time of the desert Fathers and Mothers ---this too can be read as a revelation of God’s creative and incarnate Word. So we shall define meditation as a prayerful, discursive reflection on God and our lives, through attention to God as revealed in scripture and creation. In meditation, the mind reflects on the interplay between revealed Christian truths, scripture, and one’s personal experience of life in time and place; words and ideas will function to articulate awareness, decision, or commitment in faith. Contemplation we shall define as the near wordless and imageless attention to the loving presence of God, a non-discursive, restful “being present” within the encompassing circle of God’s love. A rigid sequential progression, and the medieval ascesis culminating in ladders of ascent, spiritual “marriage” and ecstatic union are not a part of the assumptions of this definition. And as the Dictionary of Christian spirituality puts it, “Contemplation alone is volatile, can lose touch with earth and the word made flesh, needs some ballast of analysis and self-reference. Meditation alone can be ponderous, may succumb to self-pre-occupation, needs the leaven, the freedom, of wordless loving. Even so there is …an element of mystery”.

2.4 Theological reflection

I understand theological reflection as a particular form of meditation, drawing on tools of theological analysis, but also on the insights, metanoia and dunamis that come through all five dimensions of prayer. Theology is the disciplined study and hermeneutical work of the church, as it seeks to be the church in attentiveness to the triune incarnate God known in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Theology is not some idiosyncratic or individualised task, but a shared and communal one as Christians engage together to discern, name and live-out their faithful responses to God’s presence in all that is. ’Reflection’ has multiple meanings in English ---to consider or ponder carefully to gain insight ---is closest to our purpose, but to form an image, and bring out a consequence, are relevant aspects also. So theological reflection weaves together careful consideration and attentiveness to God’s presence, action, and promptings in our lives, so that out of the insights gained we may seek to live the promised more abundant life in Christ. It assumes a desire and search for meaning in the presence of a God who is both transcendent and immanent. It is the discipline of exploring our individual and shared experience, in conversation with our Christian heritage, and it seeks to bring a genuine dialogue between belief and action, so that we may confirm, challenge, clarify or further develop how we understand our experience of our life-in-God.

Robert Kinast, in his recent survey of trends in theological reflection, outlines five ‘styles’. His sequence of presentation suggests a gradual widening range of experience and of praxis. The more limited ministerial style focuses on church ministry; the spiritual wisdom style goes beyond this to the range of life experiences, but with an interest in Christian formation and appropriation of faith tradition; the feminist style goes further by critiquing and reconstructing tradition, from the perspective of women’s [and other hidden] experience, now, and historically; the inculturation style attends to the experience of men and women as shaped by and contributing to local and global culture, and shares the critical and constructive elements of the feminist style; finally, the practical style reflects on the experience of both religious and secular communities as they engage with society and address the theological implications of current and future praxis.

The summary figure below is based in part on the work of Killen and de Beer and others, and as mentioned above, has been referred to as the ’spiritual wisdom style’ of theological reflection.
Behind this diagrammatic summary are a number of points worth noting:

a. No component is as isolated as depicted e.g. our experience constantly interacts with our Christian tradition and heritage;

b. It is helpful to recognise our own standpoint, as this influences our reflection process; certitude and self-assurance block insight, whereas honest exploration can result in discovery and transformation. Clarity of present theological understanding is not the same as certitude [and its cognate, fundamentalism, of any theological or psychological stance]

c. The movement towards insight recognises that when we reflect theologically on experience we encounter our feelings as well as our Christian heritage; the poet, artist, novelist and scientist can each speak to our experience, and to our Christian heritage, and elicit both new cognitive and new affective learnings and responses. It is clear that within an open theological framework of exploration, when we pay attention to our actions, thoughts, memories, dreams, relationships and feelings, creative images may arise. Reflection on and a questioning of such images [positive and negative] may spark insight. When we are willing and ready, new insights may lead to new responses and faithful action, within oneself, and in relationship with God, the community of faith, or society.

d. Theological reflection is an expansive, not confining enterprise, and while it draws its motivation and modus operandi from the Christian meta-narrative, it is premised on the intentional desire, under the Spirit’s leading, to draw together, to allow to interweave, relevant aspects of our experience [the flow of people, places, events, material conditions]; our cultural setting [social constructs and prevailing ideas]; our geographic environment [landscape, distance, physical challenge]; our personal convictions [psychology, beliefs, opinions, assumptions]; our traditions [scriptural interpretation, doctrine, history, popular lore]; and our action in life, our “lived narrative” [activities, thoughts, feelings].

e. While its “field” is wide-ranging and to do with the whole of life, theological reflection in practice is necessarily focussed in time, place and process, and involves, among other things, a focussing on one aspect of experience, or a specific constellation of experiences; articulating [in words or other creative art forms] that experience for the purpose of identifying what is perceived as “the
heart of the matter”, the significant prompting of the Spirit, or perhaps the apparent absence of God in a specific situation; exploring the “heart of the matter” in dialogue with the wisdom and perhaps the varied and complementary strands of the Christian tradition; and identifying and extracting from this dialogue new understandings and meanings to be taken into one’s living, perhaps as new goals or priorities, or simply to enhance the “rich tapestry” of one’s life.

The words `dialogue’ and `conversation’ have been used in the above summary. Theological correlation is a related concept, and together these terms signal the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between experience and Christian tradition. Images of movement, flow and process are integral to this understanding, though the ‘correlation’ occurring within the movement may be far from smooth or harmonious, especially when existing standpoints are under threat. Hence there may also be reference to terms such as critical correlation, dialectical relationship, and from feminist theology, the notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion; the aim is not “to attack tradition, but to befriend it; it is not to dismiss [it] but to make it accessible”. So the stance is a respectful openness to different viewpoints and experiences, a recognition that some elements of the tradition have been undervalued or overlooked or suppressed, and that experience, like tradition, is complex, pluriform, and often ambiguous. But theological reflection, at its best, is an essential component and contributes significantly to the Retreat experience.

I mentioned at the outset of this section that I understand theological reflection as a particular form of meditation, especially in its ‘spiritual wisdom’ style. A closing affirmation is that contemplative prayer is a necessary touchstone of theologising, to keep it attuned to the deep experience of God that only comes in this single-minded, heart-listening, to the Spirit’s promptings and leadings: without this, no incarnatio can be other than weak-willed, cold-hearted, and self-serving. As we have seen in Luther, so Karl Barth noted, “theology…can be performed only in the act of prayer.” Contemplation keeps theology rooted in practice, and also keeps practice rooted in theology. The whole process of prayer, reflection and action finds its deepest echoes in the perichoretic tapestry of the Trinity.

2.5 The Retreat leader as Spiritual Companion
A significant contribution to the Retreat experience lies in the role of Retreat leader as ‘spiritual director’, variously known also as spiritual guide, spiritual companion, or the Celtic term anam chara, soul friend. The role relates not so much to the Retreat leader’s organisation of or substantial input to the Retreat program, but to his or her more specific contribution, usually on a one-to-one basis, in facilitating a retreatant’s personal reflection on their prayer: the images, themes, joys and challenges of their spiritual life. There is no dualism implied here, but simply an emphasis on the spiritual movements that emerge from, or raise questions about, the rest of life during the Retreat. The variations in terminology relate in part to a resistance in individualistic Protestantism to the notion that any other person can ‘direct’ or even ‘guide’ one’s prayer life and spiritual formation. My preferred term, ‘spiritual companion’, has for me the positive connotations of the One who walks the journey with us, and breaks bread [cum pane] in fellowship with us like the Jesus who accompanied the two on the road to Emmaus [Luke 24:13-35]; I am also attracted to the anam chara who offers soul-deep friendship, one who seeks to listen the other into a place of self-knowledge and prayerful articulation, so that the meaning and purpose of life are enriched and encouraged.
There have been many attempts to define `spiritual director’, such as Gordon Jeff’s “Direction…is two people sitting down together in an attitude of prayer to try to discern where the Holy Spirit is directing…the only true director is the Holy Spirit…direction is not essentially problem-centred but growth-centred”; 33 or Barry and Connolly’s “Help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her; to respond to this personally communicating God; to grow in intimacy with this God; and to live out the consequences of the relationship.” 34 The literature on companioning is, it seems, growing daily, with women and men, Protestant and Catholic, finding new, helpful and sometimes specialised ways to explore and celebrate the value of this ministry, within and beyond the Retreat setting.35

How are we to understand the theology and contemporary setting of spiritual direction as a component of Retreat ministry: Who is the `director’ and to whom are we `directed’ ?

1. The God of community: Spiritual direction is one process of facilitating the entering into prayerful communion with the God who is three persons in communion, and who uniquely represent the concrete meaning of Love. The church is called to model the reconciling love of persons-in-community, seeking the directing of the Holy Spirit as we share in that communion. Spiritual friendship or companioning invokes the mutuality of relationship inherent in the Trinity. The Word who is the bread of life is broken and shared in community to feed the companions [cum pane] on the journey. In the context of the Body of Christ, God calls us through the Spirit to a mutuality of responsible and shared discipleship. In this individualistic post-modern age, the need for balancing autonomy with creative openness to sharing the journey with others in Christ was never more needed. 'Direction’ invites this process of openness to ‘friendship with Christ the Companion’ and with others who share his ministry.

2. The God of covenant: Spiritual direction is one way in which the church seeks to be faithful to and attend to the God who calls us in Love into covenant community: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” [Leviticus 26:12]. The prophetic ministry of the Spirit is stirred up in God’s people as we discern and encourage in each other the faithful living-out of the Gospel proclamation within and beyond the community of faith. Our fundamental accountability [amidst all the expectations and pressures of others] is to the God who calls us all, through the Spirit, to new life in Christ, and to the expression of this renewing life in worship, witness and service. 'Direction’ seeks to enhance and grace this living-out of the human part of the covenant relationship.

3. The God of creation and change: Spiritual direction invites a dialogical and empowering relationship with the God who justifies the ungodly, gives life to the dead, and who calls into existence the things [relationships, gifts and graces, opportunities] that do not exist [Romans 4: 5, 17]. Through the Holy Spirit,, and facilitated by the ministry gifts of the director/companion, the imperative of “transformation by the renewal of your mind” may be pursued and fulfilled [Romans 12:2]. Growth requires change, development implies the overcoming of limitations, formation presumes re-orientation and re-shaping: the role of ‘direction’ is to invite growth in spiritual maturity, the equipping of the saints, the facing of “being tossed about by the winds of doctrine” [Ephesians 4:11-14], learning to speak the truth in love, a sense of growing into one’s full stature in
Christ. The Christian person, as an agent of change of the God of change, benefits from the centring and focussing role of the ‘companionship on the way’ in fostering his/her theological reflection on the turbulence and terror that is twenty-first century life.

4. The God of charisma: Spiritual direction is a way of fostering openness to the Holy Spirit who equips each individual [and hence the community of individuals] with particular gifts for mutual service and evangelical mission, all members of the body of Christ serving the whole people of God with these gifts. The basic New Testament usage of charis/grace refers to God’s redemptive love which is constantly active to save sinners and bring them again into proper relationship with God: here is the dynamic and concrete process of God-given growth and change, and the ‘director’s’ charism is to enhance openness and availability to God’s action, and the bringing of our ‘blockages’ and weaknesses, as well as our strengths, under Christ’s redemption and healing, reconciling work of Love. Alongside this work of Christ, and as an expression of it, the spiritual wisdom, discernment and prayerful disciplines of the church are called out to enhance our growth, but never to earn or persuade God’s responses. The ‘director’ seeks to encourage the process of appropriation of gifts, and the moulding, renewing, re-creating developmental presence of the Spirit in the life of the ‘directee’. The essential role of grace in the vocation of ‘being Christian’ underlines the gift-nature of all of life, and this motivates our desire to celebrate Christ’s presence through the Spirit in all practical details of our life-in-community. The ‘director’ has the privilege and responsibility of encouraging and enabling the plethora of gifts given by a prodigal God to all people to be celebrated in praise and service. In this sense, the ‘director’ is a sign of the presence and ministry of the gracious Christ through the gifting Spirit, incarnated as Love in the world.

5. God in all and through all: In the end, ‘direction’ is God’s business, not the preserve of some agency of the church or ‘caste’ of ministry, lay or ordained. Revelation and grace will always shatter or call into question our limiting definitions of the gifts of Christian leadership and ministry. Spiritual direction will never be controlled by the goals we identify for it, the roles we define for it, the methodologies we practice in offering it, nor the boundaries we might seek to draw with cognate ministries such as pastoral counselling, supervision or mentoring. Spiritual direction, in the church’s tradition and in its recovery and renewal in modern Protestant spirituality, is clearly involved in the search for spiritual truth, set firmly within an incarnational theology. The central affirmation that God broke into history in Christ, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and that this breaking-in continues in the Spirit wherever two or three gather in Christ’s name, here is the starting point for and essence of the director/directee relationship in particular, as for the life of faith in general. Spiritual companionship, if it is Christological, incarnational, and contextual, has a unique potential to enhance our friendship with God, our union with Christ, and our life in the Spirit, in the world ---whether during or beyond the Retreat experience.

Every person is unique, but whether on Retreat or not, people tend to consider seeking ‘direction’ when they are feeling restless or challenged; in transitions in life; dealing with losses; looking for someone to listen to their journey narrative and who can help discern the new ways they are feeling drawn; feeling guilty about not living up to
someone’s expectations ---their own, someone they care about, or God’s; wondering if “this is all there is” in a satisfying life; having spiritual experiences that are different from those they have known before; wondering whether there is some God-connection or spiritual significance to a recurring [or specific] dream; celebrating a new opening to God’s love, and wanting to receive and respond more fully; exploring general or particular questions about discernment, or decision-making; responding to new information about the benefits of Retreats or receiving spiritual direction; or in some way, recognising a yearning for God or “something more”.

It is very clear that contemporary ‘directors’ do not give ‘answers’ to these sorts of questions, tell directees what to do in their relationship with God, nor advise them when and how to make life choices. As emphasised above, the true director is the Holy Spirit, not just as a pious wish or spiritualisation of what one plans to do anyway, but as a theological sine qua non, and a pastoral imperative. The role of the ‘director’ is to listen deeply both to the directee and to God, and in this two-fold “listening of the heart”, to seek to draw the directee’s attention to the movements of the Spirit within their own life and their praying. The ‘agenda’ is never the director’s, except in so far as her or his vocation is to discern and elicit the directee’s inner dialogue with the Spirit.

Clarifying questions may be asked; creative images may be sought; life narratives or dream accounts may be invited; scripture or other reading may be offered; journaling or creative drawing may be suggested; a return to longer and deeper stillness and silence may be encouraged; new ways of praying may be explained; referral elsewhere for medical or psychological help may be occasionally prove helpful; but the role and focus of the ministry of the spiritual companion is the limited one of standing with the other in their time of praying and reflection: of being a “Paul to their Barnabas”, a “Jesus to their Cleopas”, an encouraging and empathic deep listener, and an eliciter of the directee’s own inner experience of “what is going on between me and the Spirit at present”. The sole and focal agenda is the directee’s relationship with God; the ‘companion’ is a mid-wife in this spiritual process, seeking to help the other bring to birth the new creation which is the next phase of their life in Christ. Only the directee, never the director, gives birth! The director offer resources and experience for a familiar but ever-new process, and new life comes. God is faithful to the process, and at least in ‘optimal practice’ of the ministry, ‘answers’ do come from within the prayer covenant relationship, to nourish the terrain of the directee’s life, relationships, and future discipleship.

In conclusion, the role of spiritual companion is to listen, companion, love, and be oneself. It is not: to be responsible for the retreatant’s life, to remove problems or pain, to offer holiness or defining wisdom, or to make the other a different person. It is also about listening deeply for the Spirit’s movement, to celebrate what is life-giving, and to pray and encourage the transformation of that which is not life-giving at present. As one write has put it, “To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performed for another”. Or to put it another way,

“The first task in approaching another person
another culture
another spirituality
is to take off our shoes
for the place we are approaching
is holy ground.
Else we may find ourselves
treading upon another’s dreams,
or more serious still,
we may forget
that God was there
before we arrived”.
[adapted, source unknown].

2.6 Retreat ministry: towards the concrete meaning of Love:
A general process model

Drawing on what has been outlined above regarding the origins of and trends in Retreat ministry, and the contributing roles of prayer, theological reflection and spiritual companioning, the figure below attempts to summarise and highlight the key elements of the Retreat process, whatever its specific theme, location and leadership. From the particular perspective of this study, the geographic environment and specific landscape realms provide a “lens” of special significance.

Retreat: [re-]discovering the concrete meaning of Love
Prayer: letting the Spirit of God pray in us to reveal that Love
...meditatio...tentatio...oratio...contemplatio...incarnatio...

becoming still, entering silence, attending...
exploring, reflecting & noticing...
discerning, responding & choosing...
imagining, articulating & creating...
sharing, celebrating & moving on.

Fig.2.3  A general process model of Retreat ministry
Conclusion
Retreat leaders need to clarify in advance their understanding of the purpose, structuring and expected [human] outcomes of a particular Retreat. In Reuben Job’s terms, what will best lead the retreatant/s “effectively Godward” at this time and in this place? Key questions and issues for reflection are outlined in section 2.2 above.

A framework of prayer is proposed for before, during and after a Retreat, with an aim of motivating in retreatants an open expectancy and alertness to the movements of the Spirit. Five dimensions of prayer are proposed, not as a Rule to be adhered to, rather as an invitation to explore within the dynamics of leadership, theme and place, what the Spirit will choose to draw to the retreatant’s attention for action as an expression of the concrete meaning of God’s love in his or her life [2.3].

Another implication for those in or preparing for the ministry of Retreat leadership is a deep listening and empathic engagement with retreatants’ expectations and needs, and how their experiences of prayer may be drawn into theological reflection and discernment regarding the next stage of their spiritual journey. Here the fruits of thoughtful prayer are interwoven with the fruits of prayerful thought. Retreat leaders have a responsibility to model open and searching models of theological reflection, not as an abstract tool, but as a way of deeply engaging in the discernment of spirits, or more precisely, the discernment of The Spirit in one’s life [2.4].

In different ways and at different times in a Retreat experience, leaders may plan and organise, lead and preside, teach, and model a spiritually integrated modus operandi. To me these roles are summed up in the notion of spiritual companion, spiritual director, or perhaps the Celtic anam chara. The implication for Retreat leaders, as explored above, is not only that leaders need to be clear as to the type and purpose of the leadership they seek to offer “in the human”, but even more importantly that they be very clear that the “real” director or companion is always and constantly the Holy Spirit. The triune God of community, covenant, creation, charisma, and omni-presence is the one who through the Spirit of Christ teaches, clarifies and empowers every element of discernment and decision that is life-giving for the retreatant. The spiritual companion’s prime charism and vocation is God-given, and it’s prime purpose is to point the other to the call and presence of the risen Christ in their own life, and in the world at large [2.5].

The concluding figure summarises visually the main elements canvassed in this chapter, and, albeit in a two-dimensional manner, seeks to emphasise the dynamic process of the Retreat experience, and the potential for the Retreat leader to offer a significant and life-enhancing ministry which will enable the retreatants to celebrate for themselves their [re-] discovery of the concrete meaning of Love in their own lives and relationships [2.6].

There are a number of assumptions implicit in the foregoing as to the nature of spirituality and spiritual formation in the Retreat context. These are the focus of Chapter 3.
Endnotes: Chapter 2

2 See Yi-Fu Tuan, 2000, Escapism, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
5 See Robin J Pryor, 1994, In order to see better: The benefits of retreats for Christian leaders, Barnabas Ministries Inc., Canberra.
10 Frank Senn [ed.], 1986, Protestant spiritual traditions, Paulist, New York, 2.
13 Idem, 13.
16 From “The weaving of a Retreat: A prayer in the Celtic tradition”, Robin Pryor, unpublished:
20 Idem, 125f.
22 For a longer treatment of this subject, see Robin Pryor, 1991, “A simple way to pray: Luther”, chapter 14 in Robin Pryor [ed.], Open to God: Discovering new ways to pray, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 89-94.
23 On lectio divina, see Thelma Hall, 1988, Too deep for words, Paulist, New York; M. Basil Pennington, 1998, Lectio divina: Renewing the ancient practice of praying the scriptures, Crossroad, New York.
29 See Kinast, supra cit., 68.


36 Based on Bakke, op. cit.


Chapter 3

Spirituality, spiritual formation and context

As a deer longs for flowing streams, 
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, 
for the living God. 
-- Psalm 42:1-2a, NRSV.

Introduction
Spirituality is about God-yearning, faith and prayer. It has its individual and collective expressions, its beauty and its painfully-won transformations, both in the human psyche and spirit, and in church and society, though each often resist change towards wholeness. Not withstanding world-weary evidence to the contrary, I believe that the Spirit of God would draw humanity, and each one of us, as we are open, into new phases of light-out-of-darkness, and here lies the gift and challenge of Retreat ministry. The practical issues of this ministry to be addressed in this chapter include the need to clarify and explicate:

1. the usage of terms like spirituality and spiritual formation;
2. an understanding of the relevance of notions of ritual, rites of transition, and of communitas ['community building'];
3. the characteristics of pilgrimage as ‘mobile Retreat’;
4. the compilation of a descriptive process model of spiritual formation;
5. the devising of a ‘spirituality map’ as a tool for Retreat leaders and spiritual directors;
6. an introduction to the contextualisation of theology in Australia and how this may influence and enhance a Retreat experience;
7. a brief exploration of notions of place and landscape and how these help frame the experience of a retreat in the natural landscape; and
8. the contribution of dadirri-contemplation [from Aboriginal Christian spirituality] to the discernment of the numinous in the physical landscape setting of a Retreat experience.

3.1 Clarifying terms
Out of a long history of changing meanings, spirituality has come to refer to the way a person understands her or his own ethically and religiously committed existence, and the way that person acts and reacts habitually to this understanding.¹ The dictionary of Christian spirituality emphasises that
spirituality ‘concerns and embraces the whole life.’ Paul’s ‘new life’ is not another life, but the life which God has given us ‘renewed, transformed and transfigured by the Holy Spirit’. It is to do not simply with the ‘interior life’ or the inward person, but the whole person who seeks to live the dual commandments of Christ, love of God and love of neighbour, and at its most authentic, extends to the whole of cosmic creation, humanity and nature. Alister McGrath, in *Christian spirituality*, defines it as concerning “the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity, and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.” McGrath suggests that there are three main elements: a set of beliefs, a set of values, and a way of life. Together, these clarify the difference between Christian doctrine [theological teachings], and intentional practices which contribute to us knowing God [not just knowing about God]; seeking to experience life in God through Christ in the Holy Spirit; ongoing transformation, not just ‘one-off’ conversion; and seeking growing Christian authenticity in prayer, thought, and action in life. In the language of Chapter 2 here, it is about seeking more deeply to discover and live “the concrete meaning of Love,” while acknowledging that, in the end, it is of God’s gracious gifting, God’s unconditional love, not of our own work or merit. Spirituality then, is about the ways in which I seek to “practice the presence of God” in all of life.

The Reformed tradition has developed principles and safeguards to keep the tensions in balance in its understanding and encouragement of growth in the spiritual life. One approach is found in the acknowledgment and incorporation of the historic creeds and confessions in the establishment of the Uniting Church in Australia, even as it came into being via a creative new vision, *The Basis of Union*, in 1977. Howard Rice, writing in *Reformed spirituality*, notes the historic suspicion of ‘spirituality’ in the broad amalgam of traditions, not the least reason being the loss of a memory and appreciation of their own rich traditions. Because of an alleged fear and mistrust of experience and feelings in Reformed traditions [despite scriptural testimony as to the affective dimensions of love, joy, and peace and so on], Rice gives particular attention to the presence and significance of these, alongside the more cerebral strengths, in the history of the Reformers themselves, and in the churches that have evolved from them. His methodology is, in effect, a hermeneutic of positive retrieval, to balance the more typical and historic hermeneutic of suspicion.

A Reformed spirituality, with nuances in various contemporary denominations, will be characterised by exhibiting a balance in a number of areas such as in personal and communal devotion/prayer; in emotion and thought; in the affirmation of God’s good creation, with a frugal and life-sustaining stewardship of it; and in a balance between the desire for meditation and contemplation, with the outward expressions of *incarnatio*, the living-out of the relationship with God for the world.

Rice comments that “Perhaps the greatest illusion in seeking only what we want from God is that we are trying to keep control over our lives [and, we should add, God]…Part of being human is to know that our lives are not in our own power.” The immensely reassuring promise is that God, our Unconditional Lover, continues to seek us out, continues to offer invitations and opportunities, continues to forgive and reconcile, continues to seek to draw us into the
perichoretic dance of the Trinity, that we might discover for ourselves, again and
again, the concrete meaning of Love.

My perspective is that everyone has a ‘spirituality’ --- the question is on what is it
based? Augustine referred to the ordo amoris, “the order of our loves” or the
fundamental ordering of the priorities of our lives. Margaret Guenther has
interpreted this to mean that “our spirituality is not what we say, not what we
profess to believe. But how we order our loves… the resultant spirituality
pervades our whole life and involves our whole person.” Authentic Christian
spirituality is not just a segmented part of life, but a way of living all one’s life, a
seeking to walk in God’s ways, however stumblingly, at every moment of every
day. An active spirituality is earthed in the particular culture, social and religious
setting [see Retreat process model in Fig.2.3], and it is also a work of divine
transformation which puts human efforts into perspective and forces us to see
that the Spirit of God cannot be domesticated.

Richard Foster in his Streams of living water starts his analysis of the varied
manifestations of Christian spirituality with what he calls “Imitatio: The divine
paradigm “, taking as its point of departure the words of Hebrews 12:2:
“Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”, and the words of
Thomas á Kempis [c.1379-1471]: “if we are to be truly enlightened and set free
from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we
do…to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ”. Foster then draws together the great
traditions of spirituality under six headings:

- The contemplative tradition – discovering the prayer-filled life;
- The holiness tradition – discovering the virtuous life;
- The charismatic tradition – discovering the Spirit-empowered life;
- The social justice tradition – discovering the compassionate life;
- The evangelical tradition – discovering the Word-centred life; and
- The incarnational tradition – discovering the sacramental life.

Foster’s project is not just about analysis, but grows from the synthesising
conviction that these historic traditions are, in our era, “flowing together into a
mighty movement of the Spirit,” and together they offer the contours of a coming “new gathering”, a conviction that God is gathering and creating an all-
inclusive community of loving persons with Jesus Christ as the community’s
prime sustainer. While this may sound rather polemical, it derives from his
extensive scholarship, wide exchange of ideas, and finally the conviction that
these historically-observable strands are being woven into a new spirituality that
is Christological in theology and holistic in praxis.

It is clear from the foregoing summary that ‘spirituality’ is not a static, once-and-
for-all thing, nor even a unitary one, but involves responses to the inspiring work
[L: inspiro, breathe upon, inflame] of the Holy Spirit, and the outcome of
processes of the human choosing of particular paths for the deepening of
attention to and walk with God, or a choosing to draw back from this demanding
if life-giving and life-affirming [cf. world-denying] commitment.

Everyone undergoes ‘formation’ as an inevitable part of the human journey ---
the questions is, from whence does it come, and is it by default or by choice?
Sociologists Berger and Luckmann have helped us understand the importance
of diverse socialising influences in our lives, in constructing and maintaining the
‘reality’ out of which we live, not least those of our theological colleges, work
places, schools and congregations, families, and Retreat experiences. Styles of
worship, modes of conducting church business, leadership of small groups, and
the nature of a congregation’s interaction with its community, these may each
form images and foster or inhibit relationships at variance with official church
statements or theological emphases. So, every Christian undergoes spiritual
formation ---the questions are, what are its ecclesial and spiritual roots, and to
what extent is this formation intentional or haphazard, direct or indirect, explicit
or implicit? What are the social and psychological, as well as the theological
and spiritual frameworks in which this formation occurs, for example in a
Retreat context, and are the frameworks overt or at least “open for inspection”? This
is relevant to the framing of input during a Retreat, and also to the nature of the
spiritual director/retreatant relationship.

There are differences and similarities in the various definitions of spiritual
formation, as of spirituality, but there is a convergence on the fact that, in the
end, spiritual formation is a function of the Spirit of God and not primarily a
work that we do, but a stance of openness to what the Spirit may do in us. Here
is the fertile ground and the Spirit’s invitation for the offer and experience of the
ministry of Retreats.

3.2 Ritual, rites of transition, and communitas.
As we begin to reflect more closely on the ways in which spiritual formation
may occur, and the “practice of the presence of God” be enhanced in the Retreat
experience, the notions of ritual and rite of transition can be understood as a
‘micro’ perspective on the processes, and the notions of pilgrimage and journey
as a ‘macro’ perspective.

In Christian liturgical orthodoxy, “a rite is a formal act constituting a religious
observance”, as with the ‘Eucharistic rite’, and the object is to facilitate a
person’s contact with the holy, and his/her entering into a relationship with the
source of their being. As with the founding narratives of the rites of other
religions, the Eucharist is held to be instituted at the command of God [Christ]
who is also the celebrant. Other typical elements of religious rites which have
their counterpart in Christian observance include symbolism [natural objects,
such as bread and wine, symbolise the divine]; consecration [a ‘setting apart’
action which points to the divine beyond it]; repetition [the divine is
systematically brought into the present as a representation of the original sacred
action]; and remembrance [the rite preserves and transmits the founding
tradition, at the same time as sharing the experience to sustain the common faith
framework of the community]. Similarly in liturgical orthodoxy, “Ritual refers to
the prescribed form of words which constitute an act of worship [such as the
Lord’s prayer, and] is not identical with ceremonial which relates to the actions”;
nevertheless, in common usage, ritual and ceremonial have come to be
synonymous.

Belgian ethnographer Arnold van Gennep published his ground-breaking work
Les rites de passage in 1908, and this has been translated and re-published many
times as a seminal work on the subject. Studying religious and wider cultural
ceremonies and other activities, especially from the point of view of their order
and content, he distinguished three major phases of rites: separation [French:
separation], transition [marge], and incorporation [aggregation].
Taking them as a whole he called them the *schema* or dynamics of *rites de passage*. Passage might equally have been translated 'transition', and this is my preferred term, as our interest here is not the wider social rites associated with birth and baptism, ‘age of consent’ or adulthood, marriage or death, but with a defined microcosm of experience and behaviour: the ebb and flow of ‘little rites’ which enable and enhance the Retreat experience. Van Gennep’s understanding of *rites de passage* was that they related to ‘life-crisis’ events and associated ceremonies. The New Testament Greek word *krisis* related generally to life events requiring judgement and decision —discernment and action— and that this reinforces the application to the Retreat model already outlined in chapter 2.

Using the words *limen* and *liminal* from the Latin for ‘threshold’, van Gennep then proposed three terms for the associated rites and transitions: *preliminal* rites involve separation from a previous world or state or being; *liminal* or threshold rites, involve transition processes; and *postliminal* rites which involve ceremonies of incorporation and moving to a new world or state of being. He concludes that “In order to understand rites pertaining to the threshold, one should always remember that the threshold is only a part of the door and that most rites should be understood as direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure --- that is, as rites of passage”.

Eating and drinking together, ordinary or special meals, and the sacrament of Holy Communion, are all typical ways of marking incorporation, and are often necessarily repetitive, as incorporation is itself not an ‘event’ but an ongoing process. In the earliest account of the Lord’s Supper, in Paul’s words in I Corinthians 11: 17-34, we have phrases like “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup” [v.26], and “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning [diakrisis] the body eats and drinks judgement [krisis] upon himself” [v.29]. Repetition and discernment validate simple and homely rites of hospitality, as they do God’s hospitality at the Lord’s table, ‘the threshold of eternity’. We might also note that the narrative of the Emmaus road had all three of van Gennep’s elements within it [see Luke 24: 13-35]: First, *preliminal*: Jesus’ encounter with the two followers on the road, and his ‘preparation’ of them for stage 2. Second, *liminal*: Jesus’ acceptance of hospitality, and his breaking of the bread at the Emmaus home --- this was both revelatory and liminal [in drawing the two travellers into the mystery of the resurrection]; Jesus crossed their home threshold, and then drew them into crossing another kind of threshold, one of the psyche and the spirit. Third, *postliminal*: Jesus vanished [his spiritual transition], and the followers returned to Jerusalem to tell their story —a narrative of their incorporation into the new world of the One who is The Way; there was both a territorial and a spiritual passage as the outer and inner journeys coalesced.

Van Gennep’s work was taken up and elaborated by Victor and Edith Turner in a series of books, especially *The ritual process*, and *Image and pilgrimage*. Rites of passage are understood as transitional rituals accompanying change of place, state, social position and age in a specific culture. In our context, the ‘passages’ involve a movement through the phases of a Retreat experience, the ‘rites’ are liturgies which help mark the movement [for example, morning prayer, daily Eucharist, evening prayer], and ‘ritual’ refers to actions which contribute to the overall flow of the experience as a transitional one [such as
input on a biblical theme, guidelines for praying in some new way, offering spiritual direction during the Retreat].

The Turners pay particular attention to ‘liminality’ which they describe as the state and process of mid-transition. During this time, the characteristics of the ‘liminars’ or liminal personae [the “threshold people”, retreatants] are ambiguous, for they pass through a transitional experience which is unfamiliar, and has been likened to death, to being in the womb, and to the wilderness.¹⁹. The state of transience is of limited duration in a Retreat, possibly longer in a pilgrimage, but could also refer to the life journey with its multitude of discrete and cumulative liminal experiences.

Victor Turner uses the word communitas for the establishment of a relational quality of deep communion between people; it is a liminal quality of sacral companionship, even of “intense comradeship and egalitarianism”, ²⁰ which “just happens” spontaneously. It is a concrete, existential and I-Thou experience which critiques society or group norms, and evokes a sense of possibility. Communitas, a deep mutual sense of loving community, is gift to a Retreat group, but like an individual’s liminal experience, it cannot be organised, programmed or even expected. It breaks in at the edges of structures, and has the power in its liminality to generate, not only deep relationships between people who are together seeking God in their lives, but also to elicit profound myths, symbols, insights, poetry and works of art.²¹ The meal hospitality of one’s home, and of the Lord’s table are both a sign and creator, in mystery, of communitas-in-liminality.

Scott Peck in his book on the creation of true community, The different drum, ²² identifies four phases that intentionally-formed groups routinely go through. I understand his first phase as corresponding to separation, phases 2 and 3 as transitional, and stage 4 as incorporation and moving into communitas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 pseudocommunity</th>
<th>2 chaos</th>
<th>3 emptying</th>
<th>4 community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual differences ignored, no awareness of different assumptions</td>
<td>Differences emerge, misplaced attempts to heal, need to move an option</td>
<td>Choice to deal with barriers to communication and mutuality</td>
<td>Life begins to emerge out of ‘little deaths’; goals &amp; tasks can be addressed, and celebrated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I see parallels here between members of a Retreat group establishing community during their time together, even in contemplative silence, and also an individual retreatant’s journey into community with the God who is already a Trinitarian *communitas*. It must be emphasised that there is no simplistic ‘formula’ to create community, just as every individual retreatant has her/his own task of deepening their relationship with God --- before, during, and after the Retreat. For a tabular summary of the contributions to the Retreat process of the writers quoted, see Appendix 3.1.

While liturgy and ritual are typically understood in a communal, shared sense, and therefore more associated with a group Retreat, nevertheless, there are clear implications for solo retreats and indeed for spiritual direction sessions: what will facilitate entry, openness to what comes, and moving on, whatever the context of spiritual formation? Janet Ruffing has written that “individual direction sessions are themselves a dyadic ritual …[which] takes place in a sacred and private interview space where there is often a display of some kind of sacred or natural symbols --- flowers, images, a candle, a Bible, arranged by the Director.” Arrival and departure of the directee occur at agreed times, and the two companions may create their own beginning and closing rituals that mark their special intentions in spiritual formation --- and potentially the liminality --- for this time and space; the whole time is ideally devoted to a deep mutual listening to the narrative of the directee’s experience of the movements and promptings of the Holy Spirit, so that the sessions, as for an extended Retreat, actually exhibit and are enhanced by the ritual process as described by van Gennep and Turner.

Careful attention to the approach to each phase of the Retreat experience, and to the appropriate rituals for each, will seek to draw together the life-experience and current circumstances of retreatants, the particular theme/s of the Retreat, the evocative potential of the landscape and physical setting of the program, the creative use of music, art, and other aesthetic resources, the possibility of developing *communitas*, and the final moving-on to the next phase of life. Closing rituals are as important as any others, as they hold in sacred tension the sensitivities of Spirit-encounter and communal re-encounter, as one goes home to family, work, and the living out of the concrete meaning of Love in a setting sometimes characterised by tooth and claw, pain and injustice.

Closure may be as simple as gathering in a final encompassing circle of blessing prayer, facing inwards in prayers of thankfulness and celebration, then turning and facing outwards, perhaps with linked hands, and praying for the world and for those to whom this dissolving community now moves. Where a prayer labyrinth is available in a Retreat setting [including a beach where a labyrinth can be drawn in the sand], I have held a closing Eucharist at the centre, after the group have meditatively walked in [bearing the bread and wine, symbolically chosen objects or journals, artwork or writings], then we have walked back out the labyrinth path and kept going to our cars and the journey home. The Eucharist itself, and the meditative walking into and out of the labyrinth, hold together the life, death and new life that are together the cycle of the Christian’s ongoing journey in the Spirit. Symbol, ritual, the Word and Sacrament, the evocation of memory, insight, feelings and creative responses, the contemplative depths of the Retreat at its most liminal, these single ‘fibres’ become woven into a strong ‘rope’ of spiritual formation in the faith.
3.3 Pilgrimage and journey

“…Am I too late?
Were they too late also, those
first pilgrims? He is such a fast
God, always before us and
leaving as we arrive…
….Was the pilgrimage
I made to come to my own
self, to learn that in times
like these and for one like me
God will never be plain and
out there, but dark rather and
inexplicable, as though he were in here?”
---R.S Thomas, “Pilgrimages” 24

Pilgrimage can be seen as “mobile Retreat”, having some essential features in common with its emplaced counterpart in its quest for experiencing the nearer presence of God. Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head, has been seen as the archetypal pilgrim, journeying a particular physical path in company with a visionary quest of and to God, meshing his inner and outer journeys of self-giving love whatever the cost.25 Place or destination is important, as the Dictionary of Christian spirituality notes: 26 “Fundamental is the belief that certain sites have an especial spiritual power because of what happened there as revelations of the Divine presence and activity, either in manifestation of the holy or in events which by heroism or suffering demonstrated God’s nature and entry into the cataclysms of human experience”. The concept suggests a deconstruction of early Christian eschatology, replacing notions of an imminent parousia with a determination to venture out in search of the holy city or kingdom of God beyond the next horizon.

The term pilgrimage is used in reference to the ‘interior pilgrimage’ or ‘journey of the soul’ ['introvert mysticism’]; the classic pilgrimage to some sacred place as a paradigm of the purpose of the religion itself ['extrovert mysticism’]; and finally, every journey to one’s local church or other ‘sacred space’ is a pilgrimage in microcosm. Pilgrimage is a feature of all the major world religions, and Christian pilgrimage shares significant features with many other traditions.27 Biblical models or exemplars include Abraham’s setting out in faith, the wilderness wanderings of Israel, the return from Babylonian captivity, and the basic pilgrimage theology of Jesus who is The Way, calling all to walk in that Way.

Victor and Edith Turner 28 have written that pilgrimage has some of the liminal phase attributes in passage rites: release from mundane structure; homogenisation of status; simplicity of dress and behaviour, communitas, both on the journey, and as a characteristic of the goal, which is itself a source of communitas, healing and renewal; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of religious and cultural core-values; ritualised re-enactment of correspondence between a religious paradigm and shared human experiences; movement from a mundane centre to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the
individual, an *axis mundi* of faith; movement in general (as against *stasis*), symbolizing the uncapturability and temporal transience of *communitas* [see Appendix 3.2 for the Turner’s broad classification of pilgrimages].

Margaret Miles in *The image and practice of holiness* details how ‘imitation’, ‘ascent’ and ‘pilgrimage’ have each functioned as metaphors for the Christian life over the centuries. The metaphor of pilgrimage serves to highlight the transience of life and the priority of living it well, for God and for neighbour. Another challenge lies in the potential individualism of an actual pilgrimage experience [only the ‘successful’ pilgrims were ‘saved’], and in its use as an activist metaphor for one’s own efforts, downplaying or overlooking the Spirit’s fundamental role. The metaphor can function, not so much to contrast the present and the eschatological future, but as an invitation [to borrow from another writer] to the ‘sacrament of the present moment’, at each phase of the pilgrimage that is a Retreat experience, and the whole God-given journey of life.

Writers linking the inward and outward journeys have often done so from the perspective of ‘stages of development’, as with Piaget [logic], Kohlberg [moral development], and Fowler [faith development]. A major critique from the perspective of women’s faith development has recently been published by Nicola Slee [2004], building on earlier work by Carol Gilligan [1982], and promises a significant refinement and elucidation of Fowler’s work from women’s perspectives. Each of these, and a continuing critique of and building on their work, can helpfully inform reflection on and re-formulation of the processes of Retreats *in situ* and *per agros* [‘across the fields’, from whence comes the Latin term for pilgrims, *peregrini*]. The notion of a gradual movement towards spiritual and moral maturity and autonomy may inform the Retreat leader and pilgrimage conductor in their guidance of individual retreatants, and in framing the Retreat/pilgrimage experience.

Slee’s study emphasises women’s “faithing” as being characterised in particular by the conversational, metaphorical, narrative, personalised, conceptual and the apophatic; and the fact that there is a major emphasis for women on patterns of alienation, awakenings, and relationality in faith development. Carol Gilligan in her book *In a different voice* believes that Kohlberg’s portrayal of the stage-6 person’s moral status, one who is verbal, analytic and oriented to individual success, is very much biased to the western male’s cognitive and moral values. Such a schema effectively downplays and implicitly denigrates typical female values of being focussed on the real [cf. the conceptual], the particular [cf. the general], the concrete [cf. the abstract], and the relational [cf. individualistic]. Her strong critique is a salutary reminder than no schema is adequate on its own, especially where context is overshadowed by formalism of approach.

In the next section, a tabulation of suggested further correlates of van Gennep’s original phases will inform the construction of a general process model of spiritual formation, as a way of framing the dynamic process and potentialities of Retreats and pilgrimages alike.

### 3.4 Spiritual formation: A general process approach

Historically, spiritual formation and development have been understood from at least three theological perspectives: Spiritual formation is primarily a human achievement; second, it results from human action in co-operation with the grace...
of God; or third, it results from the grace of God alone, acting upon an essentially passive human nature.

The first is associated with the so-called ‘Pelagian heresy’, though it also finds support in Orthodox Christianity, and in John Wesley’s emphasis on the call to Christian perfection. The second is found in Augustine’s “God operates without us, and cooperates with us” ---conversion is God’s work, and we live as collaborators with God. The third is found in some Reformers, with their emphasis on the overwhelming importance of the role of divine grace in the Christian life.36

My own preference is to re-word the second as “Spiritual formation results from the grace of God, acting in the life of a person who intentionally seeks to `live the concrete meaning of Love’” We are not merely passive beings, and we are often not cooperative, but theologically the grace of God precedes and initiates my prime vocation of being formed by the Spirit throughout my life; formation does not result, firstly, from my human action, but God’s, but I am called into ever-new openness and kenosis. Roman Catholic spiritual formation may emphasise more our own efforts, and the Protestant Evangelical more the joy of one’s sins freely forgiven by grace alone, but both have a strong sense of movement, of growth and change, whether the language be of purgation, illumination, and union, or of God’s justifying mercy and saving grace. Both traditions have become in recent years more inductive, functional and integrative.

In behavioural terms, spiritual formation can be described as involving an ongoing process of attention and awareness, of inquiry and exploration, of reflection and interpretation, and of integration and lived action, in the committed Christian life.

While these behaviours can be separated for descriptive purposes, they overlap and flow on to each other in interactive and often complex ways, and an overall balance is essential if [in Thomas Merton’s memorable phrase] “contemplation in a world of action” is not to become a mere oxymoron, rather than an invitation to the “abundant life” in Christ. There is a reminder here too, of the need to hold together what Bernard Lonergan refers to as the four “realms of meaning”.37

First, the realm of common sense is where we operate every day, but it is also engaged when we “discover God in the ordinary”. Second, the realm of theory understands events, persons and places not in isolation, but in relation to each other, and so we are invited to make connections between “God moments” and the rest of life, in time and place ---theological reflection is a key tool here in the context of a Retreat experience. Third, the realm of interiority refers to the movements of one’s mind and spirit at various levels of consciousness, with a special emphasis on processes of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. While a crucial part of spiritual formation, interiority is not an end in itself, but provides a route towards deeper layers of spiritual insight and meaning. Finally, the realm of the transcendent for Lonergan refers to the locating of the human desire to transcend the self for the Beyond, moving through the other realms to that in which God may be explicitly addressed, known and loved. Lonergan acknowledges that not everyone is able to identify and articulate these distinctive realms in their own experience, but where this is possible through practice, and perhaps with the support of an experienced
spiritual director or Retreat leader, the retreatant can consciously shift between realms and move purposively to the realm of the transcendent: here spiritual formation may be objectified in experience, understanding, decision and further prayerful action and active prayer. Implied here is a wide diversity of paths to and expressions of religious experience in [or making up] the process of spiritual formation and the exploration of meaning in the Retreat context. Meaning is mediated rather than “immediate”, but Lonergan’s work, however briefly introduced here, suggests that there are helpful ways of naming some of the mediating elements and outcomes in the spiritual life.

How do the previous discussions of spirituality, formation, ritual, pilgrimage and journey link as a framework for understanding spiritual formation as a key purpose of Retreat ministry? The tabulation in Appendix 3.3 seeks to make clear some of the relevant correlates. It will be evident that the decision has been taken to expand van Gennep’s three phases to four, in the interests of further clarification of the dynamics involved, and this is reflected in Fig. 3.1.

Any process of challenge and potential change in the expression of one’s spiritual life involves initiation and acculturation in new and demanding settings, inner and outer, and moving, for example, from the familiarity of home and work environment, and entry into new and demanding settings whether they be an institution for theological study, an extended stay in a Retreat centre, or an intentional pilgrimage to a special place. This movement can be characterised as moving between sub-cultures and involves the stretching, breaking and re-making of connections and responsibilities. There are significant transitions involved at many levels of human behaviour and response, and many changes in the expectations of others and shared outcomes. The key question is not to do with “What and how much is being learned cognitively through this experience?”, but “In what ways is this person or group being formed within?” “In what ways is this person/group growing in their capacity to discern and act upon the Spirit’s call within, and to respond with clarity and courage?” In wanting to affirm the wholeness of the human person, formation is as much or more to do with the “heart”, “soul” and “body”, as with the “head”, a particular challenge perhaps in our rationalistic western culture.

In conclusion, the basic processes involved in Retreat ministry are summarised below in Figure 3.1, emphasising how they seek to contribute to spiritual formation and to thereby enhance the [re-] discovery of the concrete meaning of Love:
Van Gennep/Turner phases
Preparation ➔ Separation ➔ Liminality ➔ Incorporation

On-going spiritual formation in the Retreat experience:
Lonergan Realms
<---Common sense<--- Theory<--- Interiority<---Transcendence<---

3.5 Patterns of spirituality: A map
In his book *A history of Christian spirituality*, Urban Holmes develops what he calls “A phenomenology of prayer”. In the course of a major survey of the characteristics of prayer, meditation and spiritual formational practices across the whole of the Christian era, from the Early Church to the modern period, and across all major regions and traditions, Holmes concluded that two “scales” helped summarise the immense range of historical material. He depicted this visually as a circle with four quadrants marked by horizontal and vertical axes [see Figure 3.2 below].

Holmes used terms long familiar in the history and theology of Christian spirituality, but gave them a helpful encapsulation. The horizontal scale is the apophatic/kataphatic spectrum, based on the degree to which a specific ascetical method advocates an emptying [apophatic] or imaginal [kataphatic] approach to prayer and meditation. Apophatic mysticism, the *via negativa*, stresses the radical difference between God and creation/creatures, the unknowability of God except by negation, and the ineffectiveness of the intellect and the senses; God is mystery, and is to be experienced only in the dark silence of infused contemplation. Kataphatic refers to the *via positiva*, the approach to experience of God through the senses, and emphasises the analogous or metaphorical connections between God and creation/creatures; concepts, images, and symbols provide a way of articulating our experience of a God who comes to us in incarnation and epiphany rather than in negation. In practice, and theologically, each of us may find ourselves at different places on the spectrum over time, and there is an invitation in many Retreat settings to explore other ways of
approaching God than those that are most familiar in our tradition or in our personal experience to date.

The vertical scale in Fig. 3.2 refers to the speculative/affective spectrum, based on the degree to which a spiritual model or practice of prayer emphasises the use of the mind [speculative], or the heart or emotions [affective]. Here too, an individual is likely to shift locus over time, and hold diverse strengths within their practices of spiritual formation --- John Wesley was a scholar of New Testament languages and the Patristics, but also experienced his heart “strangely warmed” at Aldersgate Street and preached with both evangelical fervour and a passion for social change.

I have found that Holmes’ model facilitates comparisons between spiritual masters, schools or traditions in the history of the church, on the assumption that all methods have the ultimate goal [however differently they may be expressed] of “union with God” ---which for our purposes here, I take to be analogous with “discovering the concrete meaning of Love”. Most forms of Christian spirituality are found to fall in one or other of the four quadrants: [1] apophatic/speculative, [2] speculative/kataphatic, [3] kataphatic/affective, or [4] affective/apophatic. The model also recognises a certain tension between the quadrants, and the need for balance, or a corrective of excesses such as those found in rationalism, pietism [confusion of subjective, superficial feelings with theology], quietism [emphasis on silence and intention, not devotional practices], and enencratism [moralism or excessive zeal for purity of heart].

Images of God have always been crucial in the dialectics of spirituality and in the ministry of spiritual direction and Retreats. The apophatic way is the way of the Cloud of unknowing, of wordless, imageless prayer, while the kataphatic way typically emphasises the concreteness of images, icons, imaginative meditation on scripture passages, or “reading the book of creation”. It is also helpful to distinguish between spiritual practices which relate to the training and formation of the Christian retreatant [pilgrim], and those which relate to the goal of Christian devotional practices. The former involve instrumental images found in traditions of ascetical theology, while the latter involves goal images found especially in mystical theology.

Fig. 3.2  A phenomenology of prayer [Holmes, 1980. 4]

Holmes’ work has been developed by at least two other writers. Sager in Gospel-centered spirituality created an inventory for self-assessment for purposes of group discussion and "helping people become more aware and respectful of the prevailing diversity of spirituality types”. Ware in her book Discover your spiritual type applies Holmes’ findings to congregational life through the use of what she calls the Spirituality Wheel Selector, an instrument for gauging church
member’s individual and collective preferences in worship and prayer. In relation to the four quadrants in Holmes’ diagram above, Ware refers to them as:

1. A Kingdom spirituality, equates prayer and theology with action; a visionary and assertive spirituality;
2. A Head spirituality, majors on thinking, theological renewal, the read/spoken word;
3. A Heart spirituality, seeking affective, charismatic prayer and holiness of life; God is immanent and accessible; and
4. A Mystic spirituality, where hearing from God is more important than speaking to God; more contemplative, introspective, intuitive, seeking inner renewal.

Ware emphasises, as does Holmes, that the circular model is an invitation to spiritual wholeness and “we have an opportunity to grow by (1) acknowledging and strengthening our present gifts, (2) growing toward our opposite quadrant, and (3) appreciating more perceptively the quadrants on either side of our dominant type….each category is of value, yet all are different”.

A further way of highlighting the contribution of different spiritual traditions to the rich tapestry of Christian prayer and formation is to overlay Richard Foster’s six “streams” [see 3.2 above] on the modified version of the Holmes/Sager model below. Each stream has its contemporary as well as its historic expressions, and each takes its place readily enough around the four quadrants. The accompanying panel shows particular focus, prayer emphasis, and associated risks or excesses. This “spirituality map” has proved a helpful tool in spiritual direction and Retreats, to visually situate, and give tentative articulation to, a retreatant’s experience, their sensitivities and risks, and their challenges for ongoing spiritual formation and growth in prayer-ways. The map is most useful where a Retreat program allows the mutual sharing of past experiences, future challenges, and a deepening appreciation of the legitimacy [and necessity] of different spiritual gifts and prayer practices across a diverse Retreat community or congregation.

The apophatic/kataphatic spectrum and the significance of place

The focus here is the situating of “place” in the phenomenology of prayer, especially in regard to the horizontal axis in the spirituality map. The starting point is that God is understood as the dwelling place of the world [and cosmos], rather than vice versa. The immanence of the incarnation of Christ in time and space means that prayer, meditation and worship, wherever they occur, happen both in a particularity of place, yet within the life and presence of a transcendent God. Because experiences of immanence function within a larger theology of transcendence, and both are essential and integral, apo-phasis and kata-phasis must be seen as interrelated and inter-penetrating rather than as opposing and separate approaches to God. Hence Holmes speaks of a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. The “poles” serve to critique all experiences of prayer and all epiphanies of the divine. The apophatic critiques the religious imagination’s construction of meaning in place, and the kataphatic critiques the tendency to abstraction and dis-embodiment of divine encounter, and is a reminder to de-mythologise any final dependence on place as locating God’s presence. As Jeremiah informs us, God is elusive and cannot be domesticated even for spiritual purposes [Jer. 7:4], and Stephen was clear that God could not be
Temple or houses made by our hands [Acts 7:48], let alone the landscape of God’s good creation.

While acknowledging the “overlap” along the spectrum, the tabulation in Appendix 3.4 summarizes some further characteristics of the two traditions.

Source: Holmes, 1980; Sager, 1990; Foster, 1998; Ware, 1995.
confined to the Temple or houses made by our hands [Acts 7:48], let alone the landscape of God’s good creation.

While acknowledging the “overlap” along the spectrum, the tabulation in Appendix 3.4 summarises some further characteristics of the two traditions which have sought to deal with spiritual experiences and the religious imagination, and to understand a transcendent God who meets us in incarnational immanence, in specifics of time, place and Person.

The Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* provide one of the great paths to prayer and reflection in a Retreat context.47 “Finding God in all things” is a typical description of Ignatian spirituality and the exercises, which is at once holistic, but also indicative of some kataphatic emphasis. 48 The Ignatian exercises provide a structured way of seeing, hearing and perceiving our experience, which is where God is to be found through the use of all our five senses as well as in speculative and affective ways and profoundly through the use of the imagination.

The notion of “composition of place” is Ignatius’ way of earthing a retreatant’s biblical reflection and prayer firmly in the specifics of place, while also opening him/her to mystery from beyond programs and structures. The prayer of *lectio divina* is seen as the movement from the (re)construction of place in the imagination, towards meeting God in the human heart, that is, a pilgrimage to interiority via the sacramentality of experience and place, and to God alone. Place is understood as a necessary means or reminder, not as an end in itself: it acts in *anamnesis* to usher the retreatant into the presence of God. Incarnation and transcendence, light and dark, physicality and mystery all find their place ---“the total felt-environment of the particular mystery of Christ’s life [to be contemplated] in whatever ways it can be most vividly mine”, this is the setting for prayer.49 It was from these exercises that I came to realise that while the apophatic critique ideally would downplay the richly imaginative Ignatian contemplation in biblical places or in one’s immediate setting, it also has to resort to concrete landscape metaphors itself. Even the fourteenth century classic work of *apophasis*, the anonymous *The cloud of unknowing*, resorts to imagery –the reader is warned that anyone who climbs “the lofty mountain of contemplation through sheer brute force will be driven off with stones”. One must wait patiently for the Lord’s initiative and not “impatiently snatch at grace like a greedy greyhound suffering from starvation”. We are even exhorted to “pretend to hide your heart’s longings from the Lord…”, a response [however unrealistic] dependent on the use of one’s imagination.50

3.6 Australian contextual theologies
From the brief discussion above, of the apophatic/kataphatic spectrum, and the significance for place, it is evident that the stance of this study is that prayer occurs within the specifics of a given location, and also and essentially, in the presence of the Spirit of the incarnate Christ as they mediate the life of the transcendent God. Issues of immanence and presence raise questions of the significance of contextualisation in theological reflection.

Although biblical scholars have long acknowledged that the various New Testament books exhibit theologies that are clearly multi-contextual as well as pluriform, the notion of ‘contextual theology’ is still a controversial one. This is
partly because the phrase is seen to be an unnecessary tautology --there can be no other kind of theology, when even an eminent work of [say German] theology will inevitably ‘betray’ its theological, and historical-cultural roots and context, even if it pursues universal themes. One response has been to avoid ‘narrow contextuality’ and excessive subjectivity by intentionally pursuing broader themes that avoid the supposed traps of context specificity.  

Some writers appear to want to draw a fine line between ‘contextual theology’ and what they see as a more questionable ‘context specific’ theology. This might also be expressed as the difference between a globalised theological context, and a localised context. Another response has been Goosen’s differentiation between two related but distinguishable themes in theology which have been labelled ‘first’ and ‘second’ theologies, ostensibly not in terms of priority but as a neutral classificatory tool. ‘First’ theologies focus, for example, on themes of Trinity, salvation, grace, faith and Christology; ‘second’ theologies are concerned with implication and application, as in theological reflection on everyday life, the land, community, sexuality, issues of justice and peace, medical and occupational ethics, and so on. One major contributing factor to shifts in emphasis has been the emergence of praxis theologies, and specifically of liberation theologies, out of a critical response to the supposed abstractions and lack of engagement of western theologians with justice issues in the Third World and elsewhere.

In 1981, Veronica Brady published *A crucible of prophets: Australians and the question of God*, in which she explored, through pioneering and contemporary literary works, the development of a “peculiarly Australian sense of God”, not merely despite disillusionment and disbelief, but even, she claimed, because of it, in this land full of the mysteries of the “desert God”. Over the next two decades, Peter Malone made a significant contribution in his editing of two collections of papers, first *Discovering…*, then *Developing an Australian theology*. I particularly note his inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives; the recognition of turning points in the wider Australian culture [growing religious and cultural diversity, the separation of religion and spirituality, the growth of relativism, and emergence of a new interest in the harmony and integrity of creation]; new attention to Australian suburbs as marginal places in Christian apologetic; the contributions of cosmology and ecology with their emphases on differentiation, communion, and interiority to theological reflection; the place of imagination and rediscovery of myth, and a recognition that “rationality need no longer hold the monopoly on meaning” ---following Lonergan, we have reached the stage of interiority which is bearing fruit in growing interest in ‘Australian spirituality’; and this is not about nationalism, but the discovery that while the “experience of divine immanence within creation may happen for us in any country...ordinarily this experience is given in the land where we have put down roots”.  

Since the late 1980s, Geoffrey Lilburne’s *A sense of place: A Christian theology of the land*, pioneered connections between the Gospel, Aboriginal Dreaming, and the land in Australia; Tony Kelly developed his theological program towards a “new imagining” of Australian spirituality; Cavan Brown gave attention to the physical and spiritual presence of the desert in Australia, and the ambivalence experienced by European settlers still learning to encounter God in the awesome “simplicity, quietness and humility” of the desert, an encounter with the immensity, silence, self-emptying of God; Michael Goonan identified the diaspora/exile nature and impact
of the scattered settlement of Australia; and most recently, Clive Pearson and Barry Leal, among others, have directed attention to ecotheology and the Australian environment.

Although not a theologian but a writer on Jungian psychology and lecturer in Australian literature at La Trobe University, David Tacey has an extensive and ongoing project on what he calls the “spirituality revolution” in Australia, which, like Kelly’s, can hardly be summarised in a few phrases. I just note here that his starting point in Edge of the sacred in 1995, was “Australia as a natural site for recovering the sacred”, and a belief that landscape has always been a key player in the Australian psyche and spirituality.

Eugene Stockton, an archaeologist, biblical scholar and priest, started in 1990 with Land marks. His research and encounters have deepened his conviction that Australia needs to learn from the best in Aboriginal spirituality [as with Tacey], and this is developed in his book The Aboriginal gift: Spirituality for a nation, and his proposed “Christian synthesis…congenial to present day Australians”.

Goosen concluded from his wide-ranging study that the land is very much a topic for theologising in Australia, as it is always a powerful presence in one way or another. For Aboriginals, it has always spoken of the spirit world, and only now are non-indigenous people “exploring the land and allowing it to speak to them, to hear the ‘whisper of eternity’…discovering their God in the mountains, rivers, plains, deserts, rocks and oceans…discovering sacred places, places that reveal something of their God to them”. Goosen’s overall conclusion is that theology in Australia is seeking to be more holistic and more integrated. More specifically, “It is the unity of all things in Christ who is sent by the Father and sustained by the Spirit. It is anakephalalaiosis, recapitulation of all things in Christ.”

He believes that the criteria for successful Australian theologies are:
1. they must be local, an inculturated theology;
2. they will be ecumenical-minded;
3. they need to use Christian sources, in scripture, experience and tradition;
4. they will treat a diversity of themes, “as diverse as life itself”;
5. at best, they will be collaborative;
6. they will often be synthetic;
7. they must ‘ring a bell’ or resonate with Australian readers; and
8. their authors will be conscious that Australian theologies need global theologies and vice versa, in symbiosis.

From his own analysis, Goosen might have added a ninth criterion, namely that Australian theologies will give increasing attention to ‘retrieval’ or development of sacral imagination and sacramentality, partly because of the very power of the symbols of this land, and partly in conciliation and rapprochement with emerging Aboriginal Christian theologies.

Frank Rees has recently published a critique of Goosen’s work, and especially of the debate between Lilburne and Kelly, on directions in Australian contextual theology. Rees’ own proposed way forward from the apparent impasse is to offer a reconsideration of Paul Tillich’s method of correlation as a possible “third way”. The starting point is Tillich’s belief that religion and culture have become separated in modern life and need to be re-connected by “correlation” so that God is discovered to be the common source ---all life and culture have their origin and meaning in God.
Tillich had a concrete conviction of faith in Christ as the “centre of history”, and that living “on the boundary” is the crucial place to encounter and know God — what in earlier sections I have referred to as liminal experiences as doorways to God-encounter. Further, there was the conviction that the ontological depth of all things, the “power of being” is God, and hence “to engage with the ontological significance of any cultural element was to relate to or in some way apprehend the reality of God”. And here I would add that landscape, as a cultural as well as geographical construction, has potentially this same ontological significance as God-revealer.

Rees’ key features and criteria for a correlative, conversational contextual theology, have only been mentioned briefly here, in the light of the critique of the contrasting approaches of Kelly, Lilburne and Goosens. I find his formulation both creatively invitational to an engagement with landscape as a pointer to God’s presence, and also honouring of the priority of Retreat ministry to seek the concrete meaning of Love in time and place, in the active presence of God: the Word who continues to speak the cosmos into being, with all its galaxies, constellations, planets, the very waters and firmament of our own world, and those who make their home here with all their diverse cultural patterns and spiritual expressions. And this is the same Word who became flesh and dwells among us, God with us, in the Spirit, the Trinitarian God, the “God down under” as we seek to do theology in the antipodes.

A different perspective is offered by Elaine Lindsay in her major study, *Rewriting God: Spirituality in contemporary Australian women’s fiction* [2000]. She laments the one-sided “malestream” theologising in Australia, the resulting emphasis on the *via negativa* of discovering God in absences and silences [the desert and the bush], the gendering of the landscape as female [passive, mysterious, alluring, fickle, barren or fruitful cf. the colonising masculine force], and the general privileging of the interior of the continent in our contextual theologies. When it comes to where God may be sought and found by Australian women, Lindsay’s analysis suggests that the first place “would seem to be the church” [surprisingly in a way, given her critique of institutional religion and its negative impact on women], but also profoundly in landscape, albeit in ways different from many men. “For women, landscape can be an important aid to theologising, but their preference is not for the hard, dry places but for lush, moist places”, in the metaphor of the domestic garden, and perhaps more profoundly in the family setting, in justice and friendship groups, as well as in all creation.

It is evident that the contextualisation of Australian theologies has been one of significant interest and debate over the past 20 years. While there is academic debate about methodological models and theological presuppositions, and an understanding that no one theology will suffice, there is also an enthusiasm to ensure that the landscape and cultural milieu of Australia continue to provoke enquiry and conversation about just how it is that we are discovering God’s presence in new and different ways in this land. I find this both daunting and encouraging for developing Retreat ministry that takes the landscape seriously. In practice, my leadership of Retreats is helpfully informed by the background surveyed here, and by theological [and probably psychological] predilection, I find the correlative conversational and imagistic-narrative modes suggested by Rees, and by Pickard, to be most rewarding personally and for those with whom I work, whether in specifically “wilderness” Retreats, or in the more sedate settings of Retreat centres in the mountains, on a river, or by the sea, as explained in the next section.
3.7 Retreats in the natural landscape

In this brief section we are concerned with any general ways in which a Retreat experience may be influenced and indeed enhanced by its geographic setting. It is a matter of taking the ‘lens’ Geographic Environment in the visual model of the Retreat process shown in Fig. 2.3, and briefly considering how this lens might prove a relevant and helpful contribution to prayer and theological reflection in a specific landscape, given the discussion above of the inevitability [and gift] of contextualisation.

Prayer, like the rest of life, happens in the context of time and space, and space, whatever and wherever it might be, can be addressed as conducive to or as detracting from prayer. 80 I have felt shut-in, confined and unmotivated to pray in a warm, comfortable, gracious old Retreat House, and equally so in a modern, comfortable [if sparse] chapel. And I have felt driven to meditation and contemplation in a drafty old stone farmhouse on Ynns Enli off the coast of Wales, on the pebbly shore of Columba’s Bay on Iona in Scotland, and on the hot red desert sands with a distant view of Uluru in Central Australia. The prayer and its fruits did have something to do with stillness and quiet, and a lot to do with a deep sense of the numinous, as it were coming to meet me, in particular places and times. I can psychologise about ‘what was going on’ within myself at the time, and I can spiritualise or romanticise any setting, but in the end I conclude that it is often how I choose to view the setting that most impacts the praying that happens there.

This is not just about beautiful, inspiring and photogenic geographic environments of great splendour. A rainforest and a desert, a wind-swept island and an inner city park, each have their beauty and their invitations to meditation and worship, but each also has its dangers and its pain, and these elements or our interpretations of them can distract us from prayer, or invite us into a different way of praying. Perhaps it is a conversion of the [God-given] imagination that is called for. Imagination is very much a part of the Ignatian Exercises, as of many other approaches to scriptural meditation and Retreat experience in general. We need imagination, and a godly heart, to begin to discern the presence of God in another person to whom we are not otherwise attracted ["love your neighbour as yourself"]'). Similarly, we need the capacity to ‘image’ a particular place, this landscape, however barren, eroded, polluted, or home to deeply wounded victims of society, as nevertheless created by a loving God who calls us to enter the pain of it and pray in the Spirit with this groaning part of creation. The theme in chapters 2-3 has been that ‘Retreat’ is about attending to God’s presence in the here and now, not escaping from the world. So we have permission to attend to God’s presence now, whether the ‘here’ is a house or a hill, a place of beauty or a place of environmental degradation. It is a matter of noticing that God is present, that God is present in this place, and that God is calling us to respond in life-giving ways which may or may not have to do explicitly with the physicality of the place.

One of the criticisms of the Ignatian Exercises, especially by Protestants, has been that they start with scriptural texts rather than with human experience. This seems a little odd when most texts used in such a context are the narratives of the life of Jesus and his followers. Nevertheless, texts can become sterile ground for meditation, in contrast to what might be understood as God’s living presence and
action is some event in contemporary life. However, *lectio divina* is a model for reflecting on every aspect of God’s presence, rather than a confining of that presence to scripture. *Lectio divina* provides a way of attending to God’s presence in my relationships with a person, or a place, as well as in a gospel narrative. Both in my relationship with this person, perhaps a family member, and in my presence in this Retreat location, perhaps camped on Cape Barren Island in Bass Strait, I am invited into, first, meditation, a prayerful, thoughtful receptive listening to the Spirit’s guidance in this relationship [human or landscape]; second, a testing self-examination as I am taken aside [in relationship or place], searched and challenged, and brought to a new understanding; third, discerning prayer as I seek to respond to the Word of God which confronts me in this personal relationship, or with this scene of historic mistreatment of Tasmanian Aboriginal people; here is joy and pain, adoration and confession. Fourth, there is contemplation, depending on what the Spirit has drawn to my attention, I may [need to] find a place and way of resting in God’s presence, a place of healing or restoring my soul, in loving attentiveness to God alone in a time of stillness. Then finally, as I consider the next phase of my life, I hear the invitation to incarnate the fruits and graces of this time of prayer in action, perhaps seeking reconciliation, or choosing to deepen my relationships. Incarnational prayer carries forward with it memory, image, insight and commitment.

There are times on Retreat when what we have gathered up in prayer and through using all our God-given senses in the particular place and time, triggers a welling-up of a heart-felt response that can only be described as discovering the concrete meaning of Love within our life at that moment. To paraphrase Romans 8:38-39, there is nothing in all creation, neither old Retreat House nor polluted river valley, neither golden sunset nor fire-blackened forest, that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord: they can’t separate us, precisely because it is in these places, and in all landscapes, that God desires to encounter us in space as in time: there is no other way. “Pools of silence”, indeed vast reservoirs of God’s Love, are there to be discovered in this thirsty land.

### 3.8 Retreat ministry in landscape: *dadirri* contemplation

Wherever a Retreat may be held, there is the potential for the landscape to be invited lovingly to speak of God to us, and for ourselves to be opened to God lovingly speaking to us in landscape. In this way, the land can truly become a “nourishing terrain” for us, and while many non-indigenous Australians undoubtedly have come to love the land and have a deep sense of placed-ness within it, I acknowledge the danger of “playing indigenous”. Nevertheless, we have in Australia a unique Aboriginal Christian gift in *dadirri* contemplation. While this has become reasonably well known through the writings of Eugene Stockton and others, I wish to convey the essence of this form of contemplation here as a helpful way into prayer and Retreats in the Australian landscape. The original formulation was by Miriam Rose Ungunmerr and it has, for me, a special combination of indigenous insight and the essence of Christian kataphatic contemplative prayer. She is a bridge between Aboriginal and Christian, particularly Catholic, traditions, and her generous and nuanced articulation of this way of earthed prayer is a gift “even” [especially?] to Protestants seeking to make the connections of which she speaks. She is quite clear that it is Jesus the Word of God for whom she listens in the land, not a
dubious syncretism but a deeply thought-through recognition of Who it really is she encounters in country.

In an address to a liturgical conference in Hobart in 1988 Ungunmerr described *dadirri* contemplation as most at home in a bush setting, among the sand dunes, around a campfire at night, or perhaps in a quiet garden or dimly lit church with comfortable, relaxed seating. The summary below is provided as a guide to the richness of the approach for Christian retreatants, and for contemplative entry into subsequent sections on particular landscapes; the original article should be read in full.

**Dadirri contemplation:**

- **A way of inner deep listening and quiet still awareness:**
  
  *Dadirri* recognises the deep spring that is inside us.  
  We call on it and it calls to us.  
  This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for.  
  It is something like what you call contemplation.  
  When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again.  
  I can sit on the river bank,  
  or walk through the trees;  
  even if someone close to me has passed away,  
  I can find peace in this silent awareness...  
  The contemplative way of *dadirri*  
  spreads over our whole life.  
  It renews us and brings us peace.  
  It makes us feel whole again.

- **The other part of *dadirri* is the quiet stillness and the waiting.**
  
  Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait.  
  We do not try to hurry things up.  
  We let them follow their natural courses ---like the seasons.  
  We watch the moon in each of its phases.  
  We wait for the rain to fill our rivers  
  and water the thirsty earth.  
  When twilight comes, we prepare for night.  
  At dawn, we rise with the sun....

  I would like to conclude by saying again  
  that there are deep springs within each of us.  
  Within this deep spring,  
  which is the very Spirit of God,  
  is a sound,  
  the sound of Deep calling to Deep.  
  The sound of the Word of God ---Jesus.

A Retreat leader would be attuned in using *dadirri* to the possible criticisms of syncretism, of nature-mysticism, and for some more conservative Christians, a playing-with “pagan” or New Age [sic] beliefs. However, Ungunmerr’s original presentation, and the use here of this model of contemplation, is
founded on a high Christology and pneumatology. A retreatant should be held to this central core of what it has to offer, or at the very least, to recognise this core, and explore where God would take them in praying within a particular landscape, and in actually contemplating the presence of the numinous within, and the Christification of, that specific landscape.82

The other challenge of this prayer mode is experienced in common with all prayer of a busy person coming on Retreat and finding it difficult to let go of ‘baggage’, or to slow down enough for this to become a different way of being, not just another frenetic activity. Dadirri is about taking Sabbath time, it is a means to an end, not the purpose in itself. Equally, one does not have to come from an Orthodox worldview to understand the earth as sacrament, where “in the beginning” was the Word, and where “the Word came and dwelt among us”.83 If dadirri contemplation of a fierce mountain landscape or tranquil lake can lead us into savouring this part of God’s good creation as sacramental, then the retreatant can stand at that liminal threshold between transcendence and immanence and give thanks for this particular place. Similarly, the Eucharist holds together death and resurrection, and may sacramentally within a Retreat have the power and presence to symbolise our own little deaths, and call us to new life in Christ who is the Way, through the landscape, as through all our journeyings.

Stockton84 notes that dadirri is an “asceticism of the environment”, bringing together as it does, compassion, patience, gentleness and simplicity, a quatrain of attitudes which are “at the core of a spirituality that would reach out to God through one’s environment of society and nature”. Here is a notion that can lead us from contemplation into covenant and practical action. And here is ready-to-hand in the Australian environment, a lens with which to discover the rich theological imagery inherent in our landscape, of formation and deformation, of growth and decay, of life and death and rebirth: If we can attend deeply to the processes of formation and ongoing erosion of the rock stacks, the Twelve Apostles, off the coast of western Victoria, the regeneration of eucalypts after bushfires, the slow carving-out of the hills and valleys and flood-plains of the Yarra Valley, or the explosion of wildflowers after heavy rains in the desert, then our experience of and reflection upon such epiphanies will point us inexorably to God’s creative presence in the midst of seeming death and destruction. These are indeed the raw materials of a lively and life-giving contextual theology.

Conclusion
Gaston Bachelard85 in his philosophical study refers to the “felicitous space” of topophilia, a place where one may “seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped…the space we love…” It is to this wealth of creative imaging, of the exploration of connectedness and God-valuing, to which a retreatant is invited in the Australian landscape. Bachelard also uses the phrase “intimate immensity”,86 words capturing both the interiority and exteriority of a Retreat experience. He quotes the poet Rilke: “The world is large, but in us/ it is deep as the sea” ---here is an intimate immensity to be accessed in rest and day dreaming, in memory and imagination, in striding the hillside or resting beside the creek, in biblical study and theological reflection, in meditation, and in the contemplation of the
awesome grandeur and fierce terrors of creation, from the grain of sand to the whirling cosmos.

A Retreat leader’s preparation is principally to do with imagining and praying for

- the “felicitous space” of the retreat setting,
- the prayerful openness of the one who comes, and
- the expectation that in liminal moments of the Spirit’s choosing, the “intimate immensity” of God’s presence will touch again their shared lives and leave neither unmoved.

The leader, the retreatant, and the place, these interconnect to mingle at least sub-vocally their joyful and painful histories, their hidden mysteries, and their cautious hopes that they will touch the hem of the garment of the Spirit’s presence, and uncover something more of the concrete meaning of Love.

What Bachelard called “felicitous space”, others might call “sacred space” or “holy place” in the sense that others are known to have [or you have yourself previously] encountered the sacred, the holy, the Person of Christ through the Spirit, in that place, be it a place of Christian pilgrimage in Jerusalem, the ancient abbey on the Celtic isle of Iona, Uluru in the Red Centre of Australia, or a quiet garden or chapel at a Retreat centre …or one’s own home where a quiet place has been set aside, indoors or outside.

Whatever one’s understanding of symbolic landscape and whatever one’s views on the dualism of sacred/profane space, and the relevance or otherwise of other people’s experiences, each person brings imagination, intention, disposition, and prior experience to the place of their intended Retreat. Even before one meets the spiritual director or Retreat leader, one meets the place, crossing the bridge or entering through the gateway or driving along the entrance road. Already the place is coming to meet you in all its physicality, ambience and invitation, bidding you, symbolically and literally, to “sigh and slow down”. Already the trees and shrubs offer an avenue of creation’s greeting and the folds of the landscape, even a flat sparseness, draw you into its embrace. The tiredness and “baggage” of the past days are still there, there may be particular anxieties or assumptions about what is to come, but in some psychosomatic and spiritual way we don’t really understand, the hands of hospitality are already reaching out in this set-aside place. And however one comes to a particular place, be it a chapel or a beach, a mountain top or a shady river bank, that place is in effect being carved out in one’s spiritual imagination and emotional space as a place of openness to encounter with God. Its very placed-ness is an invitation and its physicality a reminder that here in this landscape the Incarnation is already happening for those with hearts to feel and eyes to see. We are not just observing the hill opposite, or imagining Jesus’ hillside, but allowing ourselves to become composed [Latin: literally “to be put in place”], in situ, for what is to come in God’s economy of revelation. To become composed, in place, is a necessary starting point for the quiet attentive state of mind and heart which are then more conducive to deep listening prayer.
While the literature reviews and model formulations in chapters 2-3 will continue as “background” to chapters 4-5, illustrative landscape regions, the “foreground” lens of dadirri contemplative prayer will point us to a prayerful framing of each. Precisely to allow the landscapes to speak for themselves of God, and God to speak through contemplative openness to the landscape, the models will not be structural impositions on what follows. But they help identify resources, frame questions, and clarify responses, or sharpen discernment as to “what is going on here” in the good creation of this God who we affirm as “persons-in-mutual love”.

Retreat ministry in carefully chosen landscapes or specially designed physical settings has great potential for connecting God and nature, the senses and landscape, earthed ecological awareness and liminal moments of spiritual epiphany, intellectual endeavour and creative responses in music, song, poetry, journaling and the like. Landscape and music are perhaps especially evocative in a Retreat setting, even primordial forms of mediation, as both have the capacity to “earth” and “awe” us. In the end, the retreatant’s quest brings him/her to know that all best efforts, good spiritual practices, and inspiring settings are taken up and enveloped in Love surpassing all knowing.

For the Retreat leader, the spirituality map may offer a salutary reminder of the vulnerability of both the retreatant and leader to the risks of imbalance, the dangers of moralism, rationalism, pietism and quietism, historical evidence of obsessive asceticism and the concomitant neglect of community, and the excesses of power perhaps issuing in authoritarian or sexualised behaviour. In response, recent years have witnessed at international and national levels close attention to the need for codes of ethics, standards for the accreditation of formation programs, and an expectation that all persons engaged in retreat leadership and spiritual direction should themselves be under both spiritual direction and [separately] under professional supervision. Spiritual Directors International [headquartered in Bellevue, Washington], and current preparations
for the inauguration of the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction [AECSD], in July 2006, are significant indicators that these ministries are well aware of the need for professional approaches to ethics and formation standards within their respective spheres of influence. There is now a strong expectation across the churches that anyone offering spiritual direction and retreat leadership in Australia should place themselves under the auspices and oversight of an AECSD-recognised formation program or related association, and covenant for professional supervision and collegial ministry support ---their own ongoing spiritual formation, as well as that of their retreatants, is at stake.
Endnotes: Chapter 3

1 This definition paraphrases one by Urs von Balthasar, quoted in Alan Richardson [ed.], 1969, A dictionary of Christian theology, SCM, London, 328; the history of the term is traced in Urban T Holmes, 1980, A history of Christian spirituality: An analytical introduction, Seabury, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
4 A phrase used by Brother Lawrence, 1958, The practice of the presence of God [being conversations and letters of Nicholas Herman of Lorraine], Spire Books, Old Tappan, New Jersey. Brother Lawrence [c.1614-91] was a lay Carmelite.
11 Idem, 273.
14 Davies, supra cit, 336.
16 Idem, 25.
20 Idem, 95.
21 Idem, 128.
36 These points further developed in Alister McGrath, 1999, Christian spirituality, op. cit., chapter 4.
38 Idem, 83f.
39 Idem, 266.
42 Holmes, supra cit., 11, uses the phrase “terminal image” where I prefer “goal image”.
44 Corinne Ware, 1995, Discover your spiritual type: A guide to individual and congregational growth, Alban Institute.
45 Idem, 44f.
49 Fleming, op. cit., 30 [Second Week, Fifth Contemplation, para. 125].
53 Gideon Goosen, 2000, Australian theologies: Themes and methodologies into the third millennium, St Paul’s Publications, Sydney, 133ff.


Goosen, *op. cit.*, 179f.

Goosen, *op. cit.*, 295.

Idem, 297-300.


Rees, *op. cit.*, 282.


Elaine Lindsay, 2000, *Rewriting God: Spirituality in contemporary women’s fiction*, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta Georgia.

Idem, 75.


On the notion of ‘Christification of place’ see Lilburne, *op.cit.*.

84 Stockton, 1995, *op. cit.*, 14
86 *Idem*, 183.
Chapter 4

Nourishing terrains: Retreat themes in landscape:
A case study in the Australian coastline

Country…is a nourishing terrain. Country is a place that gives and receives life… a living entity.

---Deborah Bird Rose

How nourishing is Nature to the soul
That loves her well ! not only as she acts
In instant contact with its quickened powers,
But as she tempers all its after-moods
Though distant memories and remotest tokens.
And hence, when thus beloved, not only here
By the great Sea, or amid forests wild,
Or pastures luminous with lakes, is she
A genial Ministrress; --but everywhere !
Whatever testifies of her is good,
However common; fresh, however known….

---Charles Harpur

‘Can you tell me’ Le Mesurier had asked…‘if you are coming to this damned country for any particular purpose?’ ‘Yes’, answered Voss, without hesitation, ‘I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart’.

---Patrick White, in Voss

Introduction
The ministry-development issues pursued through this chapter include:

1. the notion that the physical setting of a Retreat may be revelatory of God’s presence ---landscape indeed carries the story of creation as ongoing revelation [geophany];
2. by way of extended illustration, the Australian coastline is examined as a particular record of landscape evolution, and therefore an appropriate focus for theological reflection on experience of the numinous in time and space;
3. resources of theology, literature and art are investigated for their respective insights into retreatants’ potential experiencing of coastal realms as ‘nourishing terrains’ for the spirit; and
4. specific issues of theodicy in relation to coastal realms are discussed, both to acknowledge alternative ‘world-views’ vis-à-vis God and ‘natural disasters’,
and to identify an appropriate theological discourse when such issues are raised in the context of a Retreat experience.

There are two classical Greek words for place, *topos* and *chora*. The first refers to simple location as shown by map co-ordinates or a GPS, and the second refers to place as connected, experienced, an energising force “suggestive to the imagination, drawing intimate connections to everything else in our lives”. There is a parallel here with *chronos*, clock-time in all its metronomic repetitiveness, and *kairos*, that special God-given moment of epiphany or unique liminal opportunity. Imagination and spirit are surely fired when *chora* and *kairos* converge --- here is the unique invitation and possibility of Retreat ministry in-place and in-time.

As with the quotation from Voss above, this chapter is about discovering a love for particular parts of this country “with the heart”, as well as with the mind. It is about *dadirri* contemplation, taking rather more time and giving deeper attention to place than we might ordinarily commit to “just being there”. It is about discovering something of the concrete meaning of Love through the ministry of selected “nourishing terrains” to our whole beings as vehicles of God’s life-giving presence. It is about encountering something of the God-implanted *choraphilia* that has been part of cosmic creation from the beginning.

In the beginning was the Word [*logos*],
and the Word was with God, and the Word
was God. He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him.
And without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

---John 1:1-4, NRSV

Norman Habel’s Earth Bible Project has provided a significant critique of this reading, raising questions about just how much Earth is valued in John 1. Related intertextual studies, especially in Wisdom literature, have helped nuance our understanding of the mutuality between humanity and the earth and move beyond traditional dualisms. Australian poet Alec Derwent Hope had his own hermeneutic for this familiar Gospel passage:

In the beginning was the Word...
But though it was, it was not heard.
...And then the Word began to move,
Itself unmoved...
The endless edifice of love
Felt life’s first steps upon its sill,
And in that primal globule furled
Lay all the orders of the world.

For Aboriginal Australians, “the beginning” is associated with the Dreaming, and the life-giving power of the Creator Spirit often referred to as the Rainbow Spirit. For people of the Jewish and Christian faiths, John’s theological summary has its origins in the two creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, as John had come to understand them through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Within these profoundly true myths lie our various attempts to grapple with the “why” of cosmic and earthly creation. Since the
Enlightenment, science has been more interested in the “how” of initial and ongoing creation and evolution. There is today, if not a convergence of interest, at least the hint of a new respect for the connectivities of the theological and scientific enterprises. There is also a sense in which both must combat the de-humanising influences of the rise of high technology [supposedly science-based, but also strongly ideologically-driven], and of a pervasive post-modern individualism and associated ethical malaise in the Western world. Despite these tensions and debates, there is an accepted scientific basis for our understanding of the structure, process and stage of evolution of the world’s geological make-up, and of the resulting landscape features of Australia, within which lie their contemporary potential as “nourishing terrains” for the body, mind and spirit of a retreatant. Here too is to be discovered the meta-narrative of the Book of Creation, with all its intricate inter-weavings with the Book of Scripture and two thousand and more years of study and reflection on both.

4.1 The landscape has memory
The earth is about 4,700 million years old, simple life forms appeared about 3,800 million years ago, more complex life about 600 million years ago, and homo sapiens perhaps one million years ago. The layers of meaning, purpose and possibility to be “read” from the surface of the earth, let alone at deeper layers, is immense, overwhelmingly complex, and yet not entirely unfathomable with the tools of modern earth sciences.

Controversial in the mid-nineteenth century, but perhaps prefacing something of the integrated scientific/theological vision of Teilhard de Chardin, Australian poet Charles Harpur wrote in his long poem “The world and the soul”,

From the crude records which mysterious Time
Hath graven on the crag-boned hills, and strewn
In crumbled fragments, and embedded deep,
On wild sea-shores, in dim dells, watery chasms,
And in the death-dark bowels of the Earth…

… from these again
reading their crude significance, more and more into coherence, --we wondering find
that her dark womb, through immemorial tracts of years so countless that they ghostly seem,
hath also teemed with successive births
of vegetable prophecies of spirit,
ever ascending to their own fulfilment;
and thence with sentient natures, linking on in strict organic sequency, from forms of lowest power and purpose, --on and on, to higher and highest.

Harpur invites us into this understanding of the layering of meaning in the earth’s landforms and all of nature, what Judith Wright calls “a kind of mystical evolutionism”, but also into a larger, cosmic vision of

Innumerable orbs, that spangle thick
The neighbouring heaven with seats of being, --such
As host on host yet farther forth, enrich
Infinite spaces, populous alike
With kindred glories bosomed all in Him!
As being indeed the million-featured modes
Of His omniscient Power; --each several mode
A shining link in one eternal chain
Of progress –to Perfection.\textsuperscript{14}

The geological record provides a huge ‘memory bank’ of massive changes on the earth’s surface, including those of the vast tectonic plates making up the earth’s crust as they move and break-up somewhat like huge ice-bergs. The Australian continent now has three relatively stable tectonic regions: the Western Shield [much of WA, NT, SA], a vast ancient tableland; the Eastern Highlands [eastern margins of Qld, NSW, Vic and Tas.]; and the Central Lowlands, west of the Highlands [for details, see Appendix 4.1].

Present-day coastal landforms are largely the result of the accumulation of sediment on post-ice-age drowned coasts, and subsequent marine and wind erosion, and much of the southeastern coast is characterised by alternating rocky headland ridges and accumulation beaches [Ninety Mile, Victoria; the Coorong, South Australia], backed by plains with shallow riverine and marine sedimentation. The last drop in sea levels, with a low-point about 18,000 years ago, was recent enough to facilitate the movement of Aboriginal peoples, by land, to Tasmania, and cultural vestiges have been found in Bass Strait islands which would have been mountain peaks at the time. Archaeological evidence for human presence in Australia is being revised constantly, but arguments for at least 40-60,000 years BP are now well established. The fossil and artefact records are also part of the landscape’s “memory” and “set of illustrations” in the Book of Creation. ANU researchers found stone tools below a 40,000 year old layer in a limestone cave in Kakadu.. In 1956, the chance discovery by a road-worker, led to one of the world’s greatest fossil discoveries, at Canowindra in NSW: this and subsequent research has revealed geological “pages” with over 3,000 Devonian age fish [c.400 million years], some 1.5m long.

Gwen Harwood,\textsuperscript{15} in her poem “A memory of James McAuley”, recalls her fellow poet turning over and over in his hand a Devonian brachiopod she had just chipped from its surrounding rock:

“When this was newly made
the earth was already old,
but then, for the first time, clothed in green”.
You spoke of great ferns uncoiling
Their fiddle-scroll fronds in voiceless air.
“They gave us our atmosphere”.
The fossil lay warm in your palm.
“A palaeozoic poem,” (you were smiling)
“well made, with form and rhyme”.

Poetry, like ancient strata, carries in its multiple layers hints of meaning and purpose that point to narratives and possibilities beyond the meagre evidence immediately at hand.

The ecological record also provides some significant “appendices” in the Book of Creation. For example, many Australian plants are specially adapted to survival in a challenging landscape.\textsuperscript{16} Many have an “awe-inspiring range of adaptations that mitigate the water balance problem”,\textsuperscript{17} including: the ability to fix chemically the carbon dioxide
at night; internal structures allowing rehydration even after total dessication; ability to store water in leaves, stems or roots; photosynthesing stems and leaf stalks, not just leaves; closure of stomata under water stress; massive, deep root systems; ability to complete their life cycle while moisture is plentiful; narrow and hardy leaves and tough bark to minimise evaporation; and seeding patterns adapted to regeneration after long dormancy on dry and hot earth.

Scientist David Suzuki has recently published *Tree: A biography*, the fascinating life-story of a single Douglas fir on the Pacific coast of North America, and author Ashley Hay has written *Gum*, the story of eucalypts as a defining feature of the Australian landscape ---both would provide imaginative resource material for retreatants in woodland and forest settings. We might note that some eucalypts not only stress-defoliate in summer [the opposite season to northern hemisphere deciduous trees], building up fuel for future grass and bushfires, but also have the capacity for rapid regeneration after fires ---a rich metaphor for resurrection out of crucifixion, new growth out of fiery devastation.

![Image](image.png)

*Fig. 4.1 New life out of death: Eucalypt regrowth on branches and from roots after Canberra bushfires, January 2003. Gordon Ramsay, April 2003.*

Other native shrubs such as most wattles have hard-coated seeds, and they and some native peas require fire to crack open their fallen seed pods and trigger growth at a time when competition has been reduced. Some high altitude eucalypts require a period of low temperature and moist conditions [perhaps as snow] to ensure they germinate in spring. Different plants have varied limits of tolerance to their landscape setting, having adapted to factors such as water availability and seasonality, temperature, light, atmosphere, soil type and available nutrients. Ecosystems and plant communities, in all their complexity and diversity, demonstrate profound interdependence and mutuality in survival and regeneration, as well as providing a visually-pleasing and life-giving richness to how we perceive a specific landscape. All these characteristics provide a far-reaching lesson in biodiversity and adaptability to environmental stress, and again a metaphor for the
interdependence, flexibility and adaptability of the human person and community, including their spiritual life: “grow where you’re planted”!

And what of the future of our geology and coastal landscape? It has been suggested that in another 50 million years Gondwana will reunite, New Zealand will collide with the east coast of Australia [putting “Sydney” far inland], and in 100 million years, Australia and Indonesia will coalesce and the Tasman Sea will close: “But you don’t have to panic, that will be for people about 3 million generations in the future to worry about”! 21 The humour aside, here is an indication that the processes of destruction and formation continue unabated on the earth’s surface, and below, however slowly. We should not be surprised, even in the relatively short term, by the inundation of Venice, and Pacific Islands, by volcanic and earthquake activity, landslides and tsunamis, and by other events such as bushfires, floods and global warming. Some impacts on the landscape may or may not have human agents in their chain of causation, but they also reflect climatic, oceanic and earth crustal changes, on a regional or merely localised level. Such is the dynamism of this earth which, from the beginning, God pronounced “very good”, and which continues to be the hearth and home for the presence of the Spirit of Christ, “God with us” in the physicality of this life, including its geographic landscapes. The complex history and contemporary dynamism of our landscapes provide a rich contribution to a retreatant’s reflection on the particular nourishing terrains and latent geophanies. Rather than a digression into geological science of minimal relevance, the stance here is that the very notion of landscape as a bearer of memory is central to appreciating its profound contribution to a Retreat experience and a valuable addition to the framing of the ministry involved.

4.2 The pull of the edge: Coastline and seascape

What is centre, and what is periphery in a country like Australia? There is much mythology and nostalgia about The Red Centre and Uluru, but over 90 per cent of us live on the ‘margins’ with easy access to the coastline, even if we don’t actually live there except at holiday time or upon retirement.

Australia is among the largest continents in the world, and the only one completely surrounded by water. The total coastline length is nearly 60,000 kms, but about 40 percent of this comprises island coastlines, 24,000 kms compared with the mainland coastline length of 36,000 kms. The coastlines of Queensland and Northern Territory combined are about equal to that of Western Australia [12,889 kms.]. 22 Mainland Australia and Tasmania have at least 10,685 beaches, and at least 800 others are on 30 inhabited islands. 23 We are a land of beaches, islands and coastline, just as much as we are a land of the outback and mountain, of cities and the bush.

Geologically, a coastline may be formed by submergence, as with Port Philip Bay, by uplift and emergence, as with the area near Portland in western Victoria, or as a result of slippage around fault lines, as with the creation of the Mornington Peninsula horst coastline between the Selwyn and Tyabb faults, and the sinking of the Kooweerup Swamp area and Westernport Bay east of the Peninsula; Australia does not have the fiords of New Zealand, flooded glacial valleys with cliffs plunging steeply into the sea.
A coastline may be rocky or sandy, steeply cliffed, or barely raise itself above the high tide mark, it may be treacherous or inviting [or both], and it always faces two ways: to the familiarity and security, or at least the solidity, of the land, and to the openness and fluidity, and also the dangers, of the waters, and to the seductive mystery of the horizon/sky conjunction. It is an ambivalent place, as celebrated in many Homeric epics, a marginal place of many possibilities, and may indeed have been the necessary ecological niche for the emergence of the human species and culture. For some, it is an active rather than passive place: RD Fitzgerald refers to alert, masterful waves summoning beach and palm to be up and about and moving and ever upon quest of new desires of the spirit, not sunk in soft rest.

For others, says John Blight, it is a meditative place of clarity and discernment:

If I am to tell you what I believe,
I am to go ashore, to stand on sand,
And tell you my margins are here, and here,
…[but] Really I am better to speak to you in a way
That is not based on a continent of rock,
But has the wish-wash of water –is, is
The Sea…

It is as if an “ancient conversation” was initiated at creation and continues today between the ocean and the land and that a Retreat setting in a coastal area privileges participants to listen deeply to this conversation: “‘I could hear that surf / forever.’” John O’Donohue tells us in *Divine beauty,* that “The words ‘sea’ and ‘ocean’ are too small to image
such a wild divinity…The seashore is a fascinating threshold. With sublime elegance, the ocean approaches and embraces the landscape and each wave has a unique grace and rhythm…Who can tell what secrets [the ocean] searches from the shoreline? What news she whispers to the shore in the gossip of urgent wavelets? This is a primal conversation [and] must be one of the places where the earth almost breaks through to word…”

Coastlines are “by nature” edge places, threshold places, not only intermediate between physical realms, but “between places” in terms of light and atmosphere and the interweaving of terrain elements as well, and the provisional and transient nature of human occupancy. “The seashore is a theatre of fluency. When the mind is entangled, it is soothing to walk by the seashore, to let the rhythm of the ocean inside you…”

In some strange way, I have found that smallish islands, where the coastline is at hand, if not immediately visible, in all directions, enhance a Retreat experience, without denying the beauty and invitation of more extensive coastal vistas with their dominating hinterlands. I think of my Retreat experiences on Iona [Scotland], Ynnis Enli [Wales], Fetlar [the Orkneys], the Isles of Scilly south of Cornwall, Raymond Island in the Gippsland Lakes, and the Furneaux islands and Kangaroo Island in Bass Strait. There is a greater sense of [foetal-like?] physical containment, of spiritual encompassment, of the encapsulation of experience, and a microcosmic focus unconcerned with wider connections, but fostering sensitive responses and a more holistic comprehension, precisely because of the limited visual/geographic scope. Coastal areas, and [for me] islands in particular, seem to be verdant places for Retreat, for [re-] discovering the concrete meaning of Love, for letting the Spirit of God pray in us, and for places to become metaphors of God’s loving presence and of Kingdom living.

For islands in particular, perhaps all this is because the Retreat preparation phase is necessarily more deliberate [travel arrangements, luggage restrictions, cultural differences], the separation phase is more concrete [travel, and isolation from the familiar], liminality is somehow crystallised by the stronger sense of both literal and littoral threshold-crossing, and incorporation is enhanced if time is taken to deliberately reflect on, and articulate to others, the essence of one’s experience. Perhaps inner shifts are triggered by the disjunctions of the outer journey?

In terms of the general process model of Retreat ministry [Fig.2.3], it is as if in taking the geographic environment “lens” to examine an island or modest stretch of coast, one discovers it is truly a magnifying lens, and through the spirituality map [Fig.3.3], bringing the kataphatic to light in its physicality, conducive to apophatic contemplation, and, depending on the impact of natural hazards, pollution etc., raising questions of social justice. And when the contemplative “lens” of dadirri’s inner deep listening and quiet awareness, its stillness and waiting, are overlain on that of the specific geographic environment, new and unexpected images of spiritual presence and encounter often come into focus. It is interesting that Torres Strait Islanders have 80 words for different tides and their variations according to lunar and solar cycles, that the sounds, shape and colour produced are integral to their interpretation, and also that tidal movements are likened to stages of animal growth and decline. Discernment of such details of coastal-spiritual dynamics is natural to a saltwater people whose spirituality is based on Sea Dreaming and a dadirri-style attentiveness. The natural beauty of many coastal Retreat settings invites and enhances such attentiveness, though this often needs to be held in tension with experiences of natural disasters, loss of life in drownings, fragility of economic and social
life, poverty or dispossession and dispersal, as in the case of Aboriginal Tasmanians incarcerated at Wybalenna on Flinders Island.

In 1994 the National Social Science Survey included questions on how often Australians “experienced a sense of peace” in various environmental settings. The most popular response was “by the sea” —71 percent of respondents said that “when they were by the sea they often or always experienced a sense of peace and well-being”. 33 This setting was followed by the bush [66 %] and gardens [55%]. The coast provides something more than the hedonism of leisure, relaxation, sport, family times and mateship when a secular survey unearths the soulful motivations of peace and well-being. It is argued that the beach has replaced the bush as the dominant [and far more accessible] icon of the Australian population in general. 34

Nearly 25 years ago, David Millikan ran a series for ABC-TV called “The sunburnt soul” and he published a book based on the series, sub-titled “Christianity in search of an Australian identity”. 35 At the time, though very much in exploratory mode, it was the largest project the ABC had undertaken on religion in Australia. The following year, 1982, Millikan wrote that at last Australians were starting to enjoy the “abundant life” of the wide sunny beaches as well as of the vast expanses of beautiful bush —“the spirit of this great land will have its way with us”. 36 The ABC, among other media, has continued to explore the spiritual connections with the coast and the sea in recent radio and TV programs. 37 While some have seen the celebration of the sensual life in Australians’ “love affair” with the beach as a rejection of Christian asceticism as a distortion of Christianity, 38 others began to understand it as possibly representing the pursuit of “something of the numinous in the ordinary”, 39 and as a significant shift in
cultural and spiritual orientation away from the bush mythology in the late twentieth century. 40

4.3 On the beach: Themes from literature
Leone Huntsman epitomised the shift just mentioned in her *Sand in our souls: The beach in Australian history*. 41 She writes of the evolution of the Australian beach in the work of writers and artists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the “foregrounding” of nature and the beach especially in the work of Robert Drewe and Tim Winton, the poetry of John Blight, Bruce Beaver, Andrew Taylor and others, and the ABC-TV’s “Sea change” series starring Sigrid Thornton as Laura Gibson, an “escapee” from a city legal firm to the supposedly more desirable life-style of a small coastal community [and the popularisation of the phrase “sea change” for all manner of personal and family crises and coping mechanisms ]. Huntsman notes that “the closing scenes of…Sea Change episodes often touch on what Wordsworth would have called ‘intimations of immortality’, and which might be discerned here as apprehensions of the numinous or transcendent”. More generally in our literature, there is “A sense of the beach as a place of retreat where one achieves a new perspective on human concerns, gains inner peace or re-establishes equilibrium after disturbance or effort”. 42 In evidence she quotes from, for example, Bill Green, *Freud and the nazis go surfing* (1986), Kathleen Stewart, *Spilt milk* (1995), Tim Winton, *Shallows* (1984), Helen Garner, *Postcards from Surfers* (1985), Michael Gow, *Away* (1986), and Robert Drew, *The Picador book of the beach* (1993). She goes on to explore the marginality and ambiguity of the meanings of the beach ---the beach never is, it is always becoming, and specifically the notion of liminality [which is discussed in general terms in chapter 3 here].

Huntsman draws on Phillip Drew’s 43 *The coast dwellers* and his notion of “the verandah ---a threshold, neither inside nor outside--- as associated with unwillingness to commit; here one is in a transitory state, therefore indefinite, impermanent. 44 The beach is also a threshold, a liminal place. Here one is ‘on the brink’….from which one can choose to move decisively into one realm or the other [or not]…Metaphorically, the beach is a place of transition between one stage of life and the next ---hence the number of occasions, in true life and in fiction, where people end their lives by deliberately crossing from the beach into the sea. Australians unconsciously respond to this liminality by enacting many of life’s significant moments there.” 45 She concludes that in Australia “The beach is less a boundary than a zone of creativity where ambiguities and possibilities flourish….a source of new meanings….tempering the absence of inner meaning, inner life…”, 46 and more than this, “During the twentieth century [the beach] became an index of our accommodation to life on this continent and a spiritual site, entering deeply into our hearts and minds.” 47

Since Huntsman wrote, Fiona Capp published *That oceanic feeling* (2003), 48 an evocative narrative about her own rediscovery and exploration of surfing Australian and overseas beaches as a way of expressing a restless, primal need, of losing herself in something larger, of sensing something of the infinite in the mundane, and in the challenging physicality of surfing. Not just a “surfie’s” book, she scrutinises the layered subtleties of beach life and culture, and pursues a personal exploration of the self, and of the dangers and ecstasies of time committed to reflecting on “that oceanic feeling” ---a possible book for reflection during [or before] a coastal Retreat.
In 1993, Robert Drewe editorialised that in contemporary fiction the beach often has to do with escape ---from what, and to what, and why, are existential questions retreatants could well reflect upon in their own lives. Drewe goes on to say that “for at least the past three generations, the average Australian has been conducting a lifelong love affair with the beach. Many, if not most, Australians [he asserts] have their first sexual experience on the coast and as a consequence see the beach in a sensual and nostalgic light. Thereafter, the beach is not only a regular summer pleasure and balm [and, perhaps we should add, of cancer-inducing sunburn], but an idée fixe which fulfils an almost ceremonial need at each critical physical and emotional stage as lovers, as honeymooners, as parents [of toddlers with buckets and spades] and, after travelling north to the particular piece of coastline befitting their class and superannuation …the elderly retired ---[or were] placed there by their children in one of the old people’s homes and hospitals which line the Esplanades and Ocean View Parades…”

Behind this slightly cynical analysis, there lies the truth both of “ceremonial” or ritual patterns of behaviour of learned adaptation to change, and also the sensate, emotional and creative responses to perceived freedom from the constraints of the serious world of work. Within both, there are innumerable accounts of the serendipity of meaningful encounter with the self, with others, and with the Spirit who continues to brood over the waters, chaotic or calm.

Winton has continued to publish novels and short stories, plus a photo essay, all of which have the beach, and coastal life, especially in Western Australia, as their significant setting ---Land’s edge, Cloudstreet, Dirt music, and The turning, to name just a few. As he comments in Land’s edge, “Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert ---a war of mystery on two fronts. What worries us about the sea and the desert? Is it scale or simple silence?” Winton’s work is of interest, not only because he acknowledges his Christian faith, not only because of the beach-side setting of many of his narratives, but because he explores connections and cross-currents: between the city and the bush, land and sea, life and death, the shallows and the depths, the natural and the supernatural. Boundary-crossing, liminal experiences are of the essence of his writing, and “the supernatural and the natural [are] accepted as one thing, as inclusive”. Categorisations are to be ignored, ambivalences resolved, and limitations transcended ---boundaries are what other people set for us, but there are other ways of looking at and experiencing life; every experience is to be seen as “on the verge” of something else, and swimming, on the verge of life and death as well as of land and sea, represents Winton’s favourite way of addressing boundaries of all kinds, and especially so for women”. Huntsman is of the view that “because autonomy is a key issue for men…[they] are less at ease with immersion…whereas women experience while swimming a comfortable balance between awareness of the separate body and the surrounding medium…” The physical reality, and metaphorical richness of swimming the margins, can be a rewarding Retreat theme.

Poets too have long been attuned to the choraphylia and geophanies of the Australian coast, and at their best evoke a deeper reflection simply as we ponder their words, or as they become a frame with which to view a real landscape. I think of lines like:

Ivan Head’s

I have decided
to take the beach
to be the literal speech of God:
  every grain of sand
  considered…

There is a hard-earned discernment in Judith Wright’s “Sea-beach”:
  …Sea, anonymous pilgrim
  made free of time and place,
  from the unhistoried poles
  and the shores of Asia and Greece…
  And though you beckon and play
  we will not stay here long.
  We will snatch back the child
  who trusts too far to your song.
  The sea cleans everything,
  a sailor said to me…;

and there is a loving altruism and sacramentality in Wright’s “The beach at Hokitika” [in this case set in New Zealand]:
  …Here in the chant of sea-edge, grind of shingle,
  I choose one stone,
  a slate-grey oval scrawled with quartz
  like a foam-edge, an edge of mountains
  white as my hair.
  I take you this for love, for being alone,
  for being, itself. Being that’s ground by glaciers,
  seas, and time. Out of the sea’s teeth
  I choose it for you, for another country;
  loving you, loving another country.

Then there is Vincent Buckley’s dessicated but mysterious yearning for the unknown:
  We knew that the sea was heaven,
  But we had never seen it.
  We dwelt miles away in limbo,
  All summer an incompetent fury
  Thinned our mouths, hardened our skin,
  Made us unable to imagine
  Those blue echoes in the shelly water
  That pulled back over the sand…

Rita Summers suggests a yachting sea-dreaming in “Wave dancer”, and there is the evocative sacramental imagery of Adele Coomb’s “Beach baptism”:
  Softly,
  a gentle wave reaches up
  to wash my feet.
  Spirit
  surges within me,
  responding to the gentle pull of power.
  ‘Not just my feet, but all of me!’
  And I plunge into the cool strength
to be buffeted and baptised  
by the ocean’s waves –  
cleansed for a new day.

The beach and its hosting coastline is deeply conducive to dadirri contemplation and the Retreat processes of

**Becoming still, entering silence, attending…**  
**Exploring reflecting & noticing…**  
**Discerning, responding & choosing…**  
**Imagining, articulating & creating…**  
**Sharing, celebrating & moving on…**

---gentle and reflective processes, conjuring up the notion of a slow and prayerful “Beachcombing for God”.61

4.4 **On the beach: Themes from paintings**  
Artists are our poets of the visual imagination. In mid-twentieth century, Kenneth Clark wrote his pioneering study *Landscape into art*, 62 where he saw landscape as a raw material waiting to be processed by the artist, where a “good view” is translated into a painted image by someone with flair, vision and technical skill. Another perspective is that land or sea *per se* is the raw material, and that in the perceptual process a particular place/view becomes landscape/seascape, and then art. 63 In all this conceptualisation debate, what is clear is that artists work very selectively, whatever their technical skill or creative imagination. As with the use of a camera viewfinder or LED screen, aesthetic or functional choices are made just by framing a view of interest, then for the artist, editing, discrimination, suppression or augmentation, even invention *ex nihilo*, proceed apace. The artist moves from, for example, an actual coastal panorama, to an aesthetically and/or functionally-significant framing, and thence to a repeated process of choice and rejection of visual elements for the emerging painting.

There is also the understanding that an artist sees with culturally constrained eyes, even politically discriminating eyes. “The innocent eye is a myth”, and “All perceiving relates to expectations”, says Gombrich in his book *Art and illusion*. 64 This so-called constructionist view acknowledges the psychological understanding that we carry predetermined visual templates in our minds and that what we see is continually adjusted to these templates. Contemporary artists like Brett Whiteley, and artists of the Heidelberg School, just as much as early colonial artists, carried ‘visual templates’ which would take time, concentration and critical faculties of visualisation and palette creation, before their paintings might satisfactorily represent the Australian landscape in its unexpected forms, colours and light conditions and emotional demands on the viewer. So it was with early writers: “Henry Lawson, Adam Lindsay Gordon and others wrote well enough to daub a permanent drab coat over the loveliness that was Australia”. 65

There is still debate as to the extent, if any, of an “obsessive influence” of European and American models of perception and technique in painting the Australian landscape. 66 While it is a truism that initially artists came from other countries and artistic cultures, Christopher Allen 67 concludes that “Australia is a case study in the development of a relatively autonomous, or at least local and specific art history. No significant work can be explained adequately as a by-product of contemporary European developments”.

Allen illustrates his point with the examples of John Glover, Eugen von Guerard, and
Abram Louis Buvelot, born respectively in England, Austria and Switzerland. They did not simply adapt to the conditions of an unfamiliar physical environment; in each case they came to articulate a new relationship with that environment, founded in the social realities of their time, and their paintings in turn became significant new “factors in the development of an ‘Australian’ culture, and they grew to be better and more important artists for responding to what was tacitly asked of them”. 68 So there are multiple agendas running in the “simple” act of painting a landscape of any kind, and one of these is the desire, capacity and effectiveness of an artist to convey some sense of the numinous through their art.

It has been argued that Impressionists, among whom artists of the Heidelberg school would be included [see McCubbin. Roberts, Streeton, Conder in Appendix 4.3], were only interested in surface realities, in light and shade and form. By contrast, the Expressionists supposedly sought to express and elicit vitality and emotion and shape questions of the viewer. Sydney Nolan’s “Fraser Island” and “Mrs Fraser” 69 painted in 1947 are examples of littoral paintings that are more interested in the artist’s and viewer’s responses than in delicacy or richness of light and form ---yet these undoubtedly contribute to the viewer’s ‘impressions’. Nolan’s interest was in the convict Bracefell’s free and confident emergence from the ocean, in the former, and Mrs Fraser’s exhaustion and exposure after shipwreck, in the latter. Clearly there are different ‘schools of thought’ among both artists and theologians seeking to make connections with art and culture, but my own lay perspective is that questions about the human condition, questions of being and becoming, questions about ‘where is God in all this ?’ can be prompted as much by von Guerard’s “Castle Rock, Cape Schank”, as by Nolan’s “Mrs Fraser”. To me, both paintings elicit emotional responses, and both use light and shade and form, as well as content, to achieve their different purposes, and the fact that they may come from different eras and ‘schools’ is secondary. 70

In a chapter “The sublime in art”, introducing a catalogue for the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 2002, Rachael Kohn 71 writes “We are alive to the sublime when our eyes drink in the grandeur of nature and experience an intuitive and primordial connection to it, or when we suddenly notice the exquisite ephemera of a life lived and see there the transient nature of so much of our existence. On a canvas and within a frame, these moving images lose their quickening and become still and quiet reminders of the transcendent meanings that lie beyond the mundane world. Quiet but not lifeless, they can take on iconic value, representing God’s panoramic paintbrush or His incarnation …The sublime is subliminal until we experience it.”

As I have argued at many points in this study, the potential for liminality is of the essence of a Retreat experience, and not least as we allow ourselves to be drawn across the perceptual threshold of an artist’s representation of an “ordinary” coastline, and encounter an awe-inspiring quality of existence. Kohn notes that the viewing public today “is largely alienated from the redemptive theology of a personal God, which informed so much of our artistic heritage. More familiar would be the spiritual movement that animated Western culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which shifted the focus of our awe from, say Renaissance art [with its high Christology and incarnational theology], to a “more homely sublime in nature”. The grandeur of the deist’s God is apparently absent from Tom Robert’s “Slumbering sea, Mentone”, von Guerard’s “Castle Rock, Cape Schank”, or Phillips Fox’s “Bathing hour” [see Figs. 4.4-4.6]. Nevertheless, the sublime, the numinous, may be encountered in the quiescent
charm of the leisurely landscape of the first; the stark and rugged headland with its diminutive human figures --- “intrepid visitors” in the early 1860s --- in the second; and the deep femininity of the mother’s loving attention in the third. Viewing a painting is similar to and different from being present in an actual landscape: The questions still arise, though “framed” for a specific Retreat experience: What is my image of God? How does God speak to me in the creative expression of this artist? In what ways may I hear the whisperings of the Spirit in this representation of physical creation, and its human participants?

The “sublime” that Kohn writes about is not about some elevation of piety or aesthetics, benediction, or purity of theological motif or imagery; it is more subtly about “pointing to a presence” or being drawn to the genius loci, the Spirit present in that place, which is sometimes beyond the frame ---precisely as in an eastern Orthodox icon, though through landscape imagery rather than sacred portraiture. Just as the artist brings a “mental template” to the painting of a particular landscape, with or without an overt theological lens, so the viewer brings his or her template and lens ---or hermeneutic--- with which they may catch a glimpse of the awesome and the holy in the grandest depiction of the Twelve Apostles off the coast of western Victoria, or the most homely scene of a family at play on the sand. “It is the prerogative of the viewer to recognise [in a particular painting the] spiritual messages that emanate more from the viewer’s intention and mental [and faith] world than that of the artist.”

A table in Appendix 4.2 lists some appropriate Australian coastal paintings which are reasonably accessible in bookshops and library collections, or which can be sourced in other volumes or viewed in galleries. The list is illustrative only and “biased” by my own preferences and access to print copies; late twentieth century artists are little represented and there are almost no works by women. There are of course numerous other appropriate paintings for reflection, and many sources other than those listed [see Christopher Allen, Art in Australia].

4.5 On the beach: Further themes for theological reflection

To reiterate, all landscapes have a presence and a memory of all that has happened to them and occurred within them, from geological origins through millennia of tectonic shifts, erosion and deposition; then there is the record of plant and animal species arising and disappearing, and of human impact, from pre-historical times through to the multifarious influences of technological change, population pressure, environmental degradation, pollution of land, air and sea; and there are long-term climatic changes and global warming, both human-induced, and as part of the huge cycles of change which the earth has experienced from the beginning. There is ready to be consulted and contemplated a vast “library” which documents and stores the records of these changes and layers of memory, the books of creation, scripture, scientific endeavour, of human creativity in oral and written history and literary and artistic ventures, and in ongoing theological reflection on where and how God’s presence is to be discerned and celebrated in all of this. In terms of the coastal landform realm, Bill Loader has written a reflection on this as “The Sea of Theology” [part only here]:

Deep into the stillness, the unfathomable ocean,
the blue, the green, the turquoise, fading into the shadowy unknown,
unseen beneath the waves, the raging foam

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or the soft, gentle shimmer of the calm sea,
deep into the stillness, the dark and generous unknown,
we ponder the heart of the divine.

Those hands that stroke the shore,
the surging forward, the falling back,
the rhythmic lapping or the downright assault
which pounds the sand and in persistence
moves metres of crushed shells and stone
to expose jutting rocks or hidden treasures long unseen,
those hands invite us, withdraw from us,
abandoning us, luring us,
to embrace the vastness of the unending waters
or just to sport playfully on its edges,
as we have time, as we have space,
as we have courage….

This sea smiles its embrace,
laps its goodness to all,
to every shore, rich, barren, beautiful, ugly,
whole, broken, smooth, rockstrewn,
yet hides an inconstancy
that defies prediction,
a depth that is beyond reach,
a mystery still becoming.

Wonder at the sea,
look out in awe,
the watered holiness of the divine
suspended in a moving pulsating symbol
of all that is, of all that God is.
It is there for us, for us all.
Theology is for all.
The sea is for all;
a theological encyclopedia for the infant and the scholar alike,
where some can surf the waves, but all can pray,
where some can build boats, launch great ships,
but all can feel the swell,
know the sound of the coming and the going,
the coming and the going,
where all can learn and teach the theology
of sand castles and salted air.

The one who stills the sea rages up a storm
the one who walks the water plummets to the depths.
The one who rides triumphant o’er the waves
is mauled by savagery upon a cross floating in cruel currents
which will have their way.

Yet we have bottled messages from afar,
relics of two thousand years of wisdom and folly,
Fig. 4.4 Tom Roberts, “Slumbering sea, Mentone, 1887”.
Oil on canvas. Andrea Inglis, 1999, 46.
Fig. 4.5  Eugen von Guerard, “Castle Rock, Cape Schank, 1865”
Chalk lithograph.  Andrea Inglis, 1999, 68
Fig. 4.6 E. Phillips Fox, “Bathing hour”, c. 1909.
Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Victoria card.
divine words to unpack on the shore,
stories to tell, dreams to dream,
madnesses to affirm,
which defy hopelessness and death,
and summon us to hear the message of the sea….

---William Loader, 2002

The exploration of any good biblical concordance or dictionary of the Bible produces numerous references and background commentaries on key words like ‘sea’ [Hebrew yam, Greek thalassa, pelagos], the Deep [primeval ocean: Hebrew tehom, Greek abyssos, pontos], island, isle [Hebrew i, Greek nesos, nesion], coast and coastland [often KJV archaism for border, boundary]. A very brief listing includes the following verses, within their broader contexts: Genesis 1: 1-13ff ; 2: 1-6ff [creation]; Ps. 29:3-4 [God’s power]; Ps.69: 1-3 [psalmist overwhelmed]; Ps. 97: 1-5ff [‘let the coastlands be glad’]; Ps. 104:5-9 [ocean and land]; Ps. 107: 23-32 [deliverance from the sea]; Matt. 8:23-27 and parallels [calming of the storm]; Mk 6:45-52 and parallels [Jesus walks on the water]; Luke 5: 1-7 [“put out into the deep”]; and John 21: 1-14 [resurrection appearance at the Sea of Tiberias].

Many theological themes suited to reflection in a coastal Retreat context have already been mentioned. The beach is a marginal place, occupied by people who are frequently themselves living a transient, marginal life, in this expanding/contracting border zone of dunes, cliffs and sea, dipping from the shallows to beyond the continental shelf into the great abyss. The changing shapes and textures invite exploration but never possession. It is also a liminal place which we have to choose to enter, or not, whether to trust ourselves to impermanence and constant change, let alone commit ourselves to the oceanic life beyond the shifting sands, literally and metaphorically. Its very marginality is both awesome and threatening, yet there is the invitation to explore the beyond, while giving great respect to the unfathomable. Lilburne has commented on the frequency of the image of ‘edge’ in Australian writing and music, and in particular explores the writers Patrick White and Judith Wright, and musician/lyricist Julie Perrin, and he notes “the deep and intrinsic dialectic between human consciousness and place(s)”.

The coast is an icon of creation with its constant processes of destruction and renewal: this bay’s undermined cliff is the next bay’s new sand banks; a past era’s deep-laid sediment is this era’s dramatic cliffs and off-shore rock-stacks ---here creation contends as always with stormy chaos and tranquil peace. No wonder that for Australians, the beach has come to epitomise re-creation.

The beach exposes us to the moods of creation, and therefore of ourselves, to stormy winds and balmy evenings, to blistering heat and icy gales ---it is a temperamental place and is somehow a catalyst for confronting or liberating human moods and passions. There can be violent erosion revealing new reefs one week, and then next week twenty delicate nautilus shells are placed reverently at the high-tide mark; we move from anxiety about beach erosion, to awe at the fragile beauty of creation and how the Spirit of God holds these together. In Jungian terms, the beach is where the male of the inland meets the female of the ocean, or where both are stripped back to basics and must contend with
archetypal images of creation writ large in the heaving, unending ocean. The sea speaks of our unconscious, our fears and our sources of trust and inner strength. A place of tension, and of enormous potential.

Similarly, the sand and its dune systems speak through *dadirri* contemplation of the forces of creation, the breaking down of old foundations and the building up in new forms; the vulnerability to external elements of both nature and human intervention; the protective rim for what lies further inland, or in the depths; the profound poetry of ebb and flow, moist and dry, life forms and detritus; and sand as *geophany*: In *“beachcombing for God”*, from its pristine *tabula rasa* after high tide begins to recede, the beach for a time holds a record of every living presence upon and within it—from the tiniest worm life, the etchings of sea-birds’ feet, the exuberant paw marks of a Labrador accompanying a man and woman on their early morning run, the sea-pruned remnants of yesterday’s child’s sandcastle, the shells and seaweed from the sea, and the abandoned flotsam and jetsam both from land and sea: an inter-tidal map and commentary on life and death at the margins.

Then there is the repetitive and seasonal aspect of beach-going ---for years my family of origin went to Rippleside beach near Geelong for January holidays, for cricket and picnics on the beach, and ‘surfing’ further west along the coast on inflatable rafts; my partner’s family caravanned at Rosebud or nearby every Christmas, on the opposite side of Port Phillip Bay, exploring the coast and inlets on a skiff. These annual cycles, now much modified but with their own patterns evident, encourage connectedness with self, others and with God. Memories are enriched and connections developed between past, present and future; continuity and change are contemplated as we seek the “thread” which holds it all together and makes some sense of “where it’s all going”.

The Deep, *tehom* or abyss of the ocean’s chaos, has been explored in relation to Christian eschatology by Keller. She contrasts an outmoded *tehomophobic* theology which has traditionally demonised the Deep, and seeks to develop instead a *tehomophilic* theology that affirms at least “the edge of chaos”, because “the very dualism of surface and depth dissolves in the face of the shimmering, interfluent layers. Thus, the literal damage to the sea as the ‘last frontier’ of environmentalism seems…to emerge as a metaphor and effect of the damage to our culture’s capacity to think, feel, and act deeply.” Keller challenges the traditional hermeneutic of Rev. 21: 1-4, “the sea was no more…” meaning “the evaporation of the *tehom* left over after the first creation” , by drawing on science’s chaos theory as well as theology, because “chaos seems to provide a bridge between the deterministic laws of physics and the laws of chance, implying that the Universe is genuinely creative”. She rightly reminds the reader that *eschaton* refers to ‘hope’ rather than to ‘end’ and points to ecological wisdoms too long excluded from theological considerations of both the Deep/chaos and genuine Christian hope for the earth.

One other writer who has made a substantial contribution to theological reflection on the ocean edge is Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, writing as a systematic theologian very much in touch with Tim Winton’s coastline of Western Australia. Author of at least five recent papers, she has explored:

1. The seascape as a spiritual resource for an Australian eco-eschatology;
2. Reflections on a coastal sense of place and faith;
3. A meditation on sand;
4. Building on Keller’s writing on "beyond tehomophobic theology"; 87 and

5. A feminist theological exploration of women, sea and Spirit.88

Her brief meditations [2-3 above] are ideal reflective pieces for use within Retreats, based as they are on her “littoral love”, the invitation to “think like an archipelago” [linking, not dividing land and sea], and exploring the vulnerabilities of “the sacred edge” and “immersion in mystery”, challenged again by Jesus’ words to “put out into the deep” [Luke 5:1-7]. The meditation on sand attends deeply both to the microscopic physical nature of sand and its geological differentiations in different beaches in Western Australia, and she makes connections with the Celtic tradition that imagines that we are sand grains caught up in the cosmic tide of inner and outer flows. Meditating on sand, and on the ebb and the flow of tides, leads us to contemplate a different rhythm or pattern for our lives than the pattern of linear progress. What might it mean on Retreat to imagine, not ourselves, but “God as a child, playing along the beach, taking sand and water to make the most wondrous forms, breathing life into them and then finding one playmate, a friend for the wind and waves”? 89 Here is an invitation to retreatants to keep God’s presence central to the coastal experience, but also to allow themselves to be drawn into relationship with this one who is accustomed both to create, and to companion mere mortals, whether in the deep, or on the beach, on the journey outward, or the journey inward.

The spiritual *habitus* of the coastline invokes a deep sense of trusted presence and possibility, of awe and liminality, as well as respect for its dangers and otherness. The other papers listed above are redolent with themes and images for retreat exploration, but also make a substantial contribution to Australian and wider theological thinking on issues of edge/periphery, eco-theology and its interface with eschatology, feminist reflections moving from “desert fathers to ocean mothers”,90 the need for “a sea-change in mapping Australian spirituality in which we de-centre a desert orientation and articulate the rich depths and fluidity of diverse coastal experiences”,91 and the eco-theological concerns to connect the local with the global, theory with activism for the earth/sea. For too long it has been *mare nullius*, but we can learn from “the island wisdom of Oceania that the coastal edge is not the end of something and the beginning of nothing…with an archipelagic imagination edges lead to new possibilities”. 92

The coast has been seen as an icon of the incarnation, as part of God’s indwelling of creation. Mornington Peninsular artist Norma Turnbull has depicted in “Beach nativity” what it might mean to contextualise the familiar biblical theme on a bay beach southeast of Melbourne, near Arthur’s Seat, just as European artists have done for centuries in their contexts [see Fig. 4.7]. One notices details like the retention of ‘Middle eastern dress’ in a contemporary Australian landscape, while there is the transformation of the ‘three wise men’ to surf-boarders coming ashore on the local beach. Here is an artistic rendering to ponder ---who are the wise persons in our culture, and perhaps what stereotypes are challenged ? What ‘star’ are they following, and where might it lead them and us ? The waves of creation and the curve of the bay are drawing them inexorably to the birth of the Christ child in their own time and space: what touches us in this possibility, what change of perspective might best allow us to be drawn into such an experience and revelation ? Alternatively what troubles us about such a depiction, maybe artistically, but more importantly theoretically, and emotionally ? Whatever one might think of a particular piece of art, there is a faith-statement to be discerned, and apparent incongruities or ambiguities balanced in the critique. God is to be found in the landscape, however
opaque the vision of the artist or viewer. The incarnation goes on in every time and place, and in every person, because Love does find a way.

4.6 The coastal realm and theodicy: Not always a “nourishing terrain”

Natural hazards afflict all corners of the earth, often unexpectedly, apparently unavoidably, and quite frequently catastrophic in impact ---rising sea levels, storms, drought, flooding, bushfires, oceanic waves, earthquakes, volcanoes, and land instability are the broad categories, each with numerous manifestations, each difficult to predict accurately, and each having its social and economic impact. 93

As already mentioned, *tehomophobia* may have its roots in the Hebrew fear of the chaos of the Deep, in Christian eschatology from John of Patmos’ apocalyptic vision of “new heaven and new earth” [Rev. 21:1], and in long traditions privileging the desert as the true place of testing and renewal. But the seascape and coastline are places of danger and hazard, as well as of spiritual and poetic inspiration. Australian poet John Kinsella 94 wrote

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You are on the verge
of a resurrection,
standing on a fragile shoreline,
erosion undermining
the limestone cliff face,
expecting to plunge suddenly
into the churning ocean.
You’d rebuild memories,
though this coastline
is always changing ---a childhood
hiding place eroded,
an overhang collapsed
like the tide. Those
limestone columns
reaching toward a god
that would take your past
as if it were an offering….
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And Andrew Taylor 95 speaks of other tragedies:

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I never believed in freak waves. I still don’t.
Families swept from rock ledges, children
scooped from placid pools, fishermen tempting
one last cast into a rising surf ---I’d sympathise
with their distraught relatives but not with them.

Anyone who has stood a day or two
even ankle deep in the sluice of open ocean…
…should know better than that.

…And when I see
the horizon crinkle and darken I run because
the sea is coming to itself, I know, and to me.
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As he says later, “One doesn’t / negotiate with oceans”. 96
Fig. 4.7  Norma Turnbull, “Beach nativity”,  Mornington Peninsula, c1999

Oil on canvas. Permission to reproduce from original granted by artist, August 2004.
Water pollution from sewerage discharge into the ocean near swimming places, ship wrecks, drownings, cliff collapses, fatal sea-wasp stings, shark attacks, hidden dangers in beach debris like impalement with infected syringes in the sand, the loss of real estate by storm erosion, and the violent wrath of the sea in cyclonic tidal surges and earth-quake-driven tsunamis ---these are a part of coastal life and livelihoods.

Retreatants, like members of the wider society, carry mental images, phrases, and emotional responses to the media coverage of natural disasters. For example, the enormous loss of life and property damage associated with the tsunami that hit Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives and even the Somalian coast on Boxing Day, 2004, seemed to many the ultimate statement of the hazards of coastal living. Newspapers were filled with graphic pictures of coastal devastation and human carnage, block diagrams of how tectonic plates shift along a fault line 1,000 kms long and cause the quakes and tsunami, and graphics of successive shock rings radiating out from the epicentre south of Sumatra. Readers and viewers were informed that seismic readings and warnings operated in the Pacific but not in the Indian Ocean, yet there were warning movements days beforehand. The island arc and so-called Pacific Ring of Fire are on the earth’s major earthquake zones, with earthquake epicentres concentrated along active tectonic plate margins, and molten rock rising to form volcanoes on mid-ocean ridges at weak points where the plates move apart or converge. Out of this creaking, jagged jigsaw of the earth’s crust came death, destruction, the threat of disease, and a vast long-term challenge to replace infrastructure, meet food, health and shelter needs, and rebuild whole provinces. And also the classic questions of theodicy, and the insurance companies’ version of the dilemma ---“when is ‘an act of God’, not an act of God ?” A huge media coverage ensued, and within days, newspapers began to carry articles headed “Is God to blame for this ?” [and on the same page “Can governments save us from disasters ?” !], “God’s role has clerics divided”, “Testing times test our belief”, “Victorians flock to places of worship”, and “Confronting this horror: Believers and non-believers have to come to their own, separate conclusions”.

Daniel Migliore, in Faith seeking understanding, writes, “theology cannot avoid the theodicy question. How can we continue to affirm the lordship of God in the face of such horrendous evil ?...If God is both omnipotent and good, why is there so much evil in the world ?” The context here is “natural evil”, the suffering of human beings at the hands of nature, rather than of “moral evil”. Migliore goes on to acknowledge that “some limits and vulnerabilities belong to the goodness of life as created by God …In such a world, challenge, struggle, and some forms of suffering belong to the very structure of life”. Responses to events such as the Sumatran tsunami, subsequent soul-searching, newspaper headlines, and sermonising, coalesce around this issue which may well be on the agenda of retreatants, spiritual directees, pastoral counselees, Bible study groups, and Spirituality in the Pub discussions. And there will be other disasters, “natural” and otherwise, as there always have been in human history; and there is already constantly present, though not of such interest to the media, vast human tragedies of poverty, disease, civil war and ethnic cleansing, abuse and injustice. Life on earth does include “tooth and claw” even as God declares creation “very good”. This is not the place to canvass even the more helpful theological responses, biblical resources, and pastoral strategies for individuals and congregations impacted more or less directly by a specific disaster. But it must be acknowledged that here lies the challenging “downside” of the poetry, paintings, and contemplative framing of any theological reflection on encounters with God in this landscape zone: There are shark attacks, there are cliff-collapses that kill children and
adults, and there are tsunamis that wreak much wider devastation. God is not all powerful in the sense that God does not intervene automatically to prevent either the events, or their tragic human outcomes. But God is all-powerful in the sense that loving compassion is always found in the Spirit’s presence in the agony and tears, always found in the community of faith’s capacity to rise above tragedy to affirm a collective strength and hope, always found in human resilience to rebuild lives, just as a fire-damaged gum tree puts out new leaves from a blackened stump within a week or two of the bushfire.\textsuperscript{100}

Verses from Brian Wren’s hymn seem relevant here: \textsuperscript{101}

1. When pain and terror strike by chance,  
   With causes unexplained,  
   When God seems absent or asleep,  
   And evil unrestrained,  
   We crave an all-controlling force  
   Ready to rule and warn,  
   But find, far-shadowed by a cross,  
   A child to weakness born.

4. Since Wisdom took its chance on earth,  
   To show God’s living way,  
   We’ll trust that fear and force will fail,  
   And Wisdom win the day.  
   Then come, dear Christ, and hold us fast,  
   When faith and hope are torn,  
   And bring us, in your loving arms,  
   To resurrection morn.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Through the metaphor and scientific insights of “landscape memory”, this chapter has provided a general introduction to the geological origins, structures and processes which contribute to the landscape realms of the Australian continent today, and then an extended case study in reflective resources and themes for Retreat ministry in one particular realm: the coastline, that intermediate and liminal place where land meets sea, where the vast fluid ocean interacts with the frayed margins of a continent of rock and sand. Until recent years the desert and the bush were centre stage in our literature and our art, and much of our contextual theologising too, perhaps not surprisingly, given the mystique of our own Red Centre, and given Christian origins in the deserts and wilderness of the Mediterranean and Middle East. As with the work of some other recent writers, this chapter seeks not only to redress something of a geographic balance of interest, but contribute to a partial re-orientation of our theological and spiritual-formational enterprises to a different kind of ‘centre’. While the coastlands and seascape may help define the continent’s ‘edge’, the coastal zone actually accounts for the majority of our habitation, and rightly invites contemplative as well as real-estate attention.

The overall ministry theme here of “setting pools of silence in this thirsty land” finds that some of the ‘pools’ are rock pools, some river inlets, some the ebb and flow of inter-tidal movements, and some are found where the continental shelf dips into the deep ocean. But all are signs and invitations for the willing retreatant to “seek the concrete meaning of Love”, as he or she grasps the lens of \textit{dadirri} contemplation and the opportunity to move intentionally to a place of liminal encounter: “Beachcombing for God” is a way of prayer.
for the one who can wait with quiet, still awareness and patient stillness, until the Spirit chooses to “turn the tide” and touch one’s heart with a love for that place, and a sensing of the moment’s geophany. Here the kataphatic and the apophatic, the intellectual and the affective, must meet and hold hands in wholeness.

While it is not assumed that every Retreat leader should adopt the geological or ecological framing of the landscape context of a particular Retreat as illustrated, what has been offered here is one avenue of taking seriously the potential interaction between landscape evolution and theological reflection. But in the end, any experience of the numinous in such a landscape, however physically attractive to the eye and evocative to the spirit, is dependent on the retreatant’s observation and imagination, coupled with their contemplative openness to the “surprises of the Spirit” in chora and kairos.

Rachel Carson, in her seminal work *The sea around us*, commented in the 1960 preface,

It is a curious situation that the sea, from which life first arose, should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life. But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself. The concrete meaning of Love is not only to do with theology and aesthetics and prayer, but urgently with increasingly effective care and advocacy for God’s good creation. May we learn better to nourish the nourishing terrain, for its sake, for God’s sake, not just our own.
Endnotes: Chapter 4


2 Charles Harpur, in Michael Ackland [ed.], 1986, *Charles Harpur: Selected poetry and prose*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 124; Harpur, the son of convicts, b. 1813, “our most important colonial poet” [Ackland, 1] and wrote in the 1820s through to 1868.


8 See The Rainbow Spirit Elders, 1997, *Rainbow Spirit theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal theology*, HarperCollins/Religious, Blackburn. The English word Dreaming [ or Dreamtime] are not satisfactory translations of alcheringa and cognates; the reference is not to something “vague and dreamlike”, “but an essential part of reality, a spiritual dimension of reality that has existed from the beginning”, p.xi; members of different Aboriginal community have differing understandings of the concept.


12 Harpur, *op. cit.*, 103ff.

13 Judith Wright, *op. cit.*, 16.

14 Harpur, *op. cit.*, 108.


17 *Idem*, 10ff.


20 Gordon Ramsay, 2003, images on CD “Canberra bush fire re-growth, April 2003, Kippax Uniting Church, Canberra [e-mail: kuc@kippax.org.au]


23 Mike Safe, 2004, “Coast guard”, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, November 20-21, 32-35; the data are attributed to Professor Andrew Short, Coastal Studies Unit, Sydney University, and co-ordinator, Australian Beach Safety and Management Program.


For reflections and respectful critique by white feminist theologians in Australia on the value of dadirri and a spirituality that is truly of the land, see Elaine Lindsay, 2000, Rewriting God: Spirituality in contemporary Australian women’s fiction, Rodopi, Atlanta, Georgia, 87.


See for example, interview with Nick Carroll in Caroline Jones, 1989, The search for meaning, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, 56; and Carroll’s recent collections of visual coastal images with accompanying text: 1999, Visions of the breaking wave, and 2001, Visions of the Australian coast, both substantial volumes produced by the Australian Surfing Life Magazine; also see Angus & Robertson [no author given], 1995, See for example, interview with Nick Carroll in Caroline Jones, 1989, The search for meaning, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, 56; and Carroll’s recent collections of visual coastal images with accompanying text: 1999, Visions of the breaking wave, and 2001, Visions of the Australian coast, both substantial volumes produced by the Australian Surfing Life Magazine; also see Angus & Robertson [no author given], 1995, coastal photography, Principal photographer John Meier [there are numerous other “coffee table” books of coastal photography]. Also see DVD “Port Philip wilderness” produced by Lynchmob Productions – see [www.bluewedges.org].


David Millikan, 1982, “Christianity and Australian identity”*, in Dorothy Harris, Douglas Hynd and David Millikan [eds.], The shape of belief: Christianity in Australia today, Lancer, Sydney, 44.


Raymond Canning, 1986, “Sharpening the question”, in Discovering an Australian theology, quoted in Lindsay, op. cit., 28, and unclearly sourced at Lindsay, idem, 5.


Huntsman, op. cit., 146.


Also taking up Drew’s work for theological purposes is Stephen Pickard, 1998, “The view from the verandah: gospel and spirituality in an Australian setting”, St Mark’s Review, 174, Winter, 4-10, especially 6, 8 re the sea and the “in-between God”.

Huntsman, op. cit., 182ff.

Idem, 190.

Idem, 221.


Idem, 6f.

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53 Land’s edge, op. cit., 36.
54 Quoted in Huntsman, 2001, op. cit., 133 [her attribution is not listed in her bibliography].
57 Judith Wright, 1990, Judith Wright: Selected poems, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 80ff, 105f.
58 Vincent Buckley, 1991, “We knew that the sea was heaven”, Vincent Buckley: Last poems, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Ringwood, 134.
60 Adele Coombs, 1992, “Beach baptism”, Barefoot dreaming, Albatross, Sydney, 62f.; see also her “An east-coast beach at dawn”, idem, 60; and Meredith Ryan, 2002, “The wide immeasurable sea” a meditation on Ps. 104, but which concludes with the lines “Sometimes as you walk/ a still beach it might be I that comes/ to wash your feet”, Eremos, 79, May, 22.
68 Allen, op.cit., 10.
69 Allen, op.cit., 126f.
71 Rachael Kohn, 2002, “The sublime in art: the last refuge of our spiritual yearning ?”, in Helen Carroll et al., Sublime, Art Gallery of Western Australia and Wesfarmers Ltd., Perth, 31-33; Kohn is Producer/Director of ABC Radio National’s “The spirit of things”.
72 Idem, 33.
73 The apparent paucity of women painters of landscapes cannot be analysed here, but see Caroline Ambrus, 1992, Australian women artists: First fleet to 1945: History, hearsay and her say, Irresistible Press, Canberra. Of the handful of landscape paintings included, several are not of Australian scenes.
74 Christopher Allen, op. cit.
77 Idem, 156; For Judith Wright, this dialectic is documented in Veronica Brady, 1998, South of my days: A biography of Judith Wright, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 84-89.
78 Lilburne, idem, 164.
See David Walker, 1977, *God is a sea: The dynamics of Christian living*, Alba/Society of St Paul, Sydney; Margaret Silf, 2003, *At sea with God*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London. Both are suitable for reflection in the preparation phase for a Retreat, or for modest “dipping into” on a longer Retreat [so that reading does not become the main focus and a diversion from finding God in that place].


Victorin-Vangerud, 2001, 9 [from website cited above].


*Idem*, stanza 31, 79.; see also stanza 27, 75, on the wreck of the Loch Ard off the Victorian coast.


An older but very readable approach to theodicy is found in Robert McAfee Brown, 1955, *The bible speaks to you*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia: chapter 11, “A threat to the whole business (why is there evil ?)”; and chapter 12, “Meeting ugly facts head on (what does God do about evil ?) “ A web search quickly finds links for theodicy, including resources from Irenaeus, Leibniz, John Hick, Rowan Williams, among many other authors ancient and contemporary.


Chapter 5

Nourishing terrains: A sketch of other landscape realms and potential Retreat themes

5.1 Deserts:
The Red Centre

5.2 Rivers:
The Murray

5.3 Other landscapes

The young girl stood beside me. I saw not what her young eyes could see.
--A light, she said, not of the sky lives somewhere in the Orange Tree……

……Silence ! the young girl said. Oh, why,
Why will you talk to weary me ?
Plague me no longer now, for I
Am listening like the Orange Tree.
---Shaw Neilson

The way we have treated the Pages [River, NSW] recently reflects our attitude to the entire world. If the river is to be allowed to flow into the future, we must first discover, and experience, the totality of its beauty and the urgency of its problems.
---Patrice Newell

It’s strange how deserts turn us into believers. I believe in walking in a landscape of mirages, because you learn humility. I believe in living in a land of little water because life is drawn together…If a desert is holy, it is because it is a forgotten place that allows us to remember the sacred. Perhaps that is why every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self. There is no place to hide, and so we are found.
---Terry Williams

Introduction
The ministry-development issues addressed in this chapter are similar to the four stated at the beginning of chapter 4. How might the physical geology, and conversely Aboriginal notions of the spirituality of place, helpfully inform our reflection on these particular landscape realms, especially the desert and the river, as part of creation, and of God’s presence in it? What insights from some of the literary and visual arts, and contextual theology, might deepen our appreciation of the rich texture of spiritual formation in specific experiences of choraphilia and geophany in deserts and river valleys?

The editor of Neilson’s poetry discusses “The orange tree” as a dialogue between...
youth and sophistication, but I also read it as a poetic affirmation of spiritual presence in creation, and as an intimation that sometimes young eyes read the signs of that presence more acutely than older desensitised eyes. As with the girl in the poem, a retreatant and his or her spiritual director seek constantly to be alert to where the light may be found in their experience of life in God’s creation. As they deepen their dadirri contemplative experience, they learn “to listen like the Orange Tree”, to listen to the way nature, creation, the cosmos, would speak to them of the numinous in all of life. Indian biblical scholar Samuel Rayan has written “The earth speaks in the eloquent silence of hills and trees. ‘Silence my soul’, said Tagore, ‘these trees are prayers’. A language the earth loves to speak is the silence of the night and the silence of the womb, the silence of seeds as they sprout and the silence of buds smiling into blossoms... no words, no voice heard, but the call goes on throughout the universe (Ps. 19: 3-4)”. The earth has many voices within the silence of the cosmos.

Consistent with the view taken in this study, Belden Lane has written that “The imagined landscape is the only one that we inhabit [and]. …The imagination is what makes possible our fullest entry into the material world…Through the imagination we create and destroy, we fear and we dream, we sin and we repent. Questions of place and its conceptual construction, therefore, are unavoidably questions of spirituality…[even as we acknowledge] that God ultimately stands beyond all places and times and cultural forms…[yet God also] stands alongside dis-placed persons everywhere…” Humanity’s creation in the image and imagination of God places our being, and our own imaging/imagination, firmly within our theology of creation. This is not as a licence for abuse and exploitation, but as an invitation to explore, with all our God-given gifts and senses, the rich diversity and awesome challenges of life in this “thin place” which is the earth’s crust, between core and cosmos.

5.1 Deserts: The Red Centre

Introduction: Apart from Antarctica, Australia is the driest continent on earth --- about 35 percent of the surface area receives so little rain it is effectively dry desert, and 70 percent of the mainland receives under 500mm of rain annually, classing it as arid to semi-arid. The major desert landscapes are distributed throughout the Western Shield and Central Lowlands, notably the Great Victoria [WA,SA], Great Sandy [WA], Tanami [WA,NT], Simpson [NT,Qld,SA], Gibson [WA], Little Sandy [WA], Strzelecki [SA,Qld,NSW], Sturt Stony [SA,Qld,NSW], Tirari [SA] and Pedirka [SA], totalling 1.371 million square kilometres or nearly one fifth of Australia’s surface area.

An Australian Geographic map depicts the Red Centre as a region centred on Alice Springs, but reaching north to the Tanami Desert and the Devil’s Marbles, and south through Yulara [Uluru-Kata Tjuta] to the Musgrave Ranges, Mintabie Opal Fields and Oodnadatta.

The geology of the Red Centre of Australia, and specifically of the desert monoliths of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, had its origins first as cratonic granites and gneisses south of the park, and then with massive long-term erosion, deposition as marine sediments of sandstone, limestone, and mudstone; this commenced 900 million years ago in the Amadeus Basin, and reached several kilometres in thickness. Uluru rock is arkose, a coarse-grained sandstone rich in the mineral feldspar;
Fig. 5.1 Kata Tjuta: eroded domes of conglomerate. Mythic significance to the Anangu people. [ANSD Pilgrimage to the Centre, May 2001. RJPryor]

Fig. 5.2 Uluru: Continued erosion of the arkose sandstone. Mythic sites of the Anangu people. [ANSD Pilgrimage to the Centre, May 2001. RJPryor]
Kata Tjuta is a conglomerate, pebbles and boulders of granite and basalt cemented together by sand and mud. There have been two eras of mountain-building with uplift, folding and faulting. Uluru and Kata Tjuta are the visible tips of huge slabs of hardened sedimentary rock which extend far beneath the present surface, possibly as much as 5-6 kilometres. The present sculpted shapes of the rocks result from ongoing processes of erosion by wind-blown sand, but also by rain water, chemical decay of minerals, and temperature changes which cause rock-splitting. Present-day sand dunes have remained in their current positions for about 30,000 years, and though the crests shift and change with the wind, the landscape is approximately that which would have been observed by the first Aboriginals to move into the area.

In this brief overview lies a specific desert landscape’s memory, as depicted in the “pages” of the geological record, but there is also the mythic-historical narrative of Aboriginal occupation, long-preceding European exploration and settlement. This latter record has been variously documented too, to give the more recent chapter in the story of this landscape’s ongoing changes and adaptations to natural and human agencies, and the varied ways in which these have been perceived and interpreted. For some retreatants to this region, there will be other modes of capturing the sense of place and the spirit of the landscape today: the Dreaming stories and law or Tjukurpa; the Anangu art in ancient rock paintings, and contemporary sand drawings and body painting; the flora and fauna, giving further insight into other expressions of life in this realm; and the intricacies of ecological change and natural history in the region as they profoundly illustrate chapters in the Book of Creation, and the invitation to explore the life-shaping movements of the Spirit of God in time and place.

Cultural historian Simon Schama has said that
Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.

This is very much the theme in this study of landscapes as Retreat settings, and it relates in a specific way to Aboriginal understandings of landscape, though this can be touched on only very briefly here. To the European tourist and back-packer, and to many of we “city dwellers from the south”, the Australian deserts seem empty, inhospitable, boring because of supposed ‘sameness’, or downright dangerous and life-threatening, rather than life-giving. But for Aboriginal tribes and clans who inhabit the northern, central and western parts of the country, the deserts are places streaming with sources of food and water, and equally interwoven in significance for their lives, there are also liminal, holy places, celebrating the movements of mythic ancestors in creation, and such landscapes are rich in spiritual meaning and physical sustenance. Creation as they understand it, is not just in some mythic past, but part of the daily spiritual life --- because all of life has a spiritual basis --- a powerful and holistic witness to Christians who are sometimes too ready to separate the spiritual from the rest of modern life. The desert landscape is saturated with a web of ancestral paths understood to be inhabited by supernaturals beings on their epic journeys of creation in the Dreaming, the almost-tangible songlines of which Deborah Bird Rose writes in *Dingo makes us human*, and Bruce Chatwin wrote in his novel *Songlines*.

The songs are a way of “walking the world into being”, as they link landscape with creation narratives, but also guide one home to one’s own country and to hunting grounds and the location of witchetty grubs and seeds, underground roots and water soaks. Far from being a place of threat, the desert is perceived as a comprehensible mosaic-map of everything that is life-giving ---the spiritual and physical first, and therefore the mental, emotional and relational.

Deserts, because of their perceived spirituality and creativity as landscapes rich in meaning, are also the home of major movements in contemporary Aboriginal art and by their very nature are liberating new expressions of Aboriginal spirituality. In the past, and being recovered and reformed for contemporary presentation [including sale to tourists], there are decorated boomerangs, clap sticks and coolamon bowls, personal adornment like necklaces, rock engravings and paintings, and more ephemeral arts such as body-painting, sand drawing and ground painting. And increasingly, Dreaming stories are being written down, where this does not infringe cultural taboos, not only for anthropologists, but for the increasingly appreciative Australian population. Aboriginal desert art has its distinctive differentiating characteristics in different regions, across the centre, and out to coastal regions. The concentric circles, meandering lines, human and animal tracks, campfire places, water sources ---we are at last beginning to appreciate that herein lies a cosmology, a spirituality of place, and a narrative social history in these ancient-yet-contemporary traditions. To date, connections are only slowly being made with Aboriginal Christian spirituality, but the work of people like Miriam Rose Ungunmerr is significant in this regard.

Whatever difficulty we might have as Christians with appreciating, let alone acceding to Aboriginal mythic narratives and spirituality, clearly the desert is alive to and evocative of memories of creation where the geology of landforms interleaves with the sub-strata of other perspectives on creation stories. Aboriginal
paintings have the capacity to link Dreaming narratives, recognisable landscape features, and representations of both human occupancy and activity, and specific ecological associations [see diagram below]. From this perspective alone, the desert is a place to be lived-into, rather than escaped from. With due sensitivity to the dangers of misappropriation, Aboriginal paintings of spiritual landscapes contain some clues for Christian retreatants seeking ways of visually depicting their own faith journeys in relation to landscapes of special significance — journey lines, campsites, sources of water, places of spiritual encounter— these have their parallels in both traditions.

![Diagram of stylised songline](image)

**Fig. 5.4** Visual depiction of stylised songline, with mythic and ecological associations in the artist’s country, Papunya, Central Australia

[Source: H. Watson & Yolngu community, Yirrkala, 1989, *Singing the land*.... 42]

The biblical “wilderness” has two different connotations: first, a place of desolation and punishment by God, or temptation by the devil [Genesis 3: 23; Jeremiah 25:38; Matthew 4:1]; and second, a place of refuge and prayer, or more often of a place where the Chosen are scattered for purgation or discipline [Rev. 17:3], or for tender care [Hosea 2:14ff]. The desert of the Bible is the stage for much of the drama of salvation history, rather than some static place to be located by name or map co-ordinates, or by the characteristics of heat and dryness. The desert, the wilderness, the ‘waste places’, are where identity is forged and God’s call is heard, where temptations are faced and testings withstood. Essentially the desert is a place of encounter and of transformation: encounter with devils, with angels and with God, and a place of transformation, because in the desert survival may only come with the vulnerability of dependence on ravens, or quails and manna. [Exodus 16: 13-16; 1 Kings 17: 1-7] A trackless place of exile, and of interminable wanderings in some biblical accounts, it is nevertheless for many the way to God, it becomes a liminal, holy place which allows one to celebrate the journey of life, rather than demarcating its start or finish. It is also a place of deliverance, blessing and exultation [Ps107: 4-9, 33-35; Isaiah 35: 1-2], and of the nourishment of the feminine [Rev 12:13-17]. Sources of biblical reflection on the desert in salvation history include Louth’s *The wilderness of God*, and Lane’s profoundly titled *The solace of fierce landscapes*. 18
Images of desert life and encounters with God continue well beyond biblical times. For the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third to fifth centuries and for monastics and hermits down to our own times, the desert is a place of refuge, of teaching and challenge for those who began to come out to them, and especially a place of focus and attention on the God who is found when we can step aside long enough from the noise and busy-ness and distractions of life in the city, and more particularly within our heads. But for these pioneers and others, the desert is also the place of re-birth, with all the pain and joy that that image conveys. To choose to go into the desert, physically or metaphorically, is to provoke krisis: it somehow highlights and hastens the experience which God has prepared for us. If you commit yourself to the desert, you don’t know what the outcome will be, and as with Jesus in his times of testing [Matthew 4: 1-11 and parallels], one is finally dependent on the Spirit to see you through. As Andrew Louth portrays it, 20 the desert pilgrim comes face to face with his or her poverty, weakness, and powerlessness at every level, and one’s defences can be lowered no further. Grace will only take over at the moment of failure, the brink of abandonment, because the desert makes us that small and that vulnerable….and that open to the numinous reaching out to touch us from the shifting sands, the shimmering mirages, and the dessicated plant life of the desert. It can be seen as a profoundly evangelical path to choose the desert way, because we become “as little children” ---human efforts are over and the heart breaks open to the care and love of the God who transforms all deserts. For some, the desert landscape has the psychological appeal of the challenge of the hazardous; for some it is the rich symbolism of emptiness and abandonment by others, from all physical comfort, and from past images of God; for some the desert narratives and motifs of biblical salvation history are a challenge and motivation to live with less clutter and more attention to the numinous; and for some it is to do with “living on the edge”, of geography, of theology, and finally of oneself, because the examined life demonstrates that it is at this liminal edge that, so often, the concrete meaning of Love is [re]discovered.

Australian literature is replete with desert images, symbolism, trauma and creative exhilaration, a wide brown land with “its beauty and its terror”. The desert has always been a landscape to trigger and ensnare the imagination. Geoffrey Serle in his survey of literature, art, music, theatre and architecture in their Australian context 1788-1972, chose as his title, from a poem by AD Hope, From deserts the prophets come. 21 He concluded thirty years ago that while national cultures are increasingly diluted by international influences, nevertheless the supposed Australian ‘literary wasteland’ had long been civilised and enriched by its writers and artists , and [again quoting AD Hope], “its values and its tendencies [have] become conscious and its creative forces become eloquent…” 22 In the same era, Inglis Moore identified Australian literary themes of “salvation in the desert”, drawing on writers like AG Stephens, B.O’Dowd, AD Hope, Judith Wright, Randolph Stow, and Patrick White. 23

A focus on sense of place, the imagination and sense of identity in relation to place, are relatively new themes, building on [or reflecting a wider trend in] the work of Casey and Schama, 24 the passionate nature-essays of American writers like Edward Abbey’s Desert solitaire, 25 and John Muir’s Mountaineering essays, the Australian essays in Tredinnick’s A place on earth, and an earlier creative
approach to “reading the country” by “nomadology”. While not concerned only with desert or wilderness, these certainly feature in the trilogy by Australian Peter Read who has brought issues of identity, belonging and the significance of place [or lost place] firmly into our consciousness, issues of immediate relevance to our emotional and spiritual well-being, and of wider ramifications as he explores places of attachment and deep affection for both Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians. Gelder and Jacobs in their book Uncanny Australia, further contribute to the debate about identity, and specifically how Aboriginal claims about sacred landscapes have radiated out to inform, but also to radically disturb, how Australians view their national identity and the landscape, including Uluru; they bring a thoughtful critique to the experience and perception of Aboriginal sacrality in a postcolonial and supposedly secular nation.

Barry Hill in The Rock explores his personal and others’ responses to the specific place that is Uluru, while Denham Grierson in Uluru journey develops a sophisticated narrative theology out of the stories told by a group of modern pilgrims in search of something, or someone, who will help them make sense of life’s journey. Suzanne Falkiner casts a much wider literary and geographic net in chapters on “wilderness reviled to the wilderness celebrated”, “the spiritual relationship with the wilderness”, and “the inland of the imagination”. Hannah’s recent essay on Australians’ connections to place attends inter alia to the desert and the outback. Alongside these, Roslynn Haynes’ Seeking the centre is the major contemporary source for literature, art and film on the Australian desert, and themes of spirituality run through many of her chapters, supplying a major resource for retreatants and their directors ---and perhaps a rationale and encouragement to other writers and artists. Haynes’ presentation of over 40 illustrations, most from well-known Australian artists, is a resource in its own right. As well as discussing Aboriginal relationships with the desert, she notes the shift from Europeans’ fears of the “dead heart”, to seeing explorers as not only opening up our knowledge of the continent’s dry interior, but of their own subconscious dry interiority. From her review of artistic and literary sources, she highlights the ambivalence and paradox of desert in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, a place of God-abandonment and of spiritual enlightenment; she also notices that indigenous artists tend to take a more holistic ‘aerial’ view of a sacred landscape, while non-indigenous artists find a greater challenge in depicting the spirituality of the land in their more cross-sectional or vertical approach to landscape painting.

In Appendix 5.1 are listed illustrative resources on the desert, in film and radio, and in fiction and poetry, appropriate for reflection by retreatants and directors. There will be significant omissions in such a short listing, and from different readers’ perspectives, and themes of spirituality and exploration of the numinous in desert landscapes are often implicit only [for reviews from particular authors’ perspectives, see Haynes, Falkiner and others above].

Australian art.

Albert Namatjira’s paintings from the Finke River [Lutheran] Mission, at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory, were dismissed as derivative by white art critics from his first solo exhibition in 1938, but these have been re-assessed and are now better understood as expressing his personal spiritual earthing and vision. The catalogue from a recent retrospective exhibition of his art notes that
Namatjira lived in the two worlds of Lutheran Christianity and aboriginality, “but what non-Aboriginal people didn’t understand, or chose not to understand, was that he was painting his country, the land of the Arrernte people. He was demonstrating to the rest of the world the living title held by his people to the lands they had been on for thousands of years...[the critics and] The buyers did not recognise the Aboriginal laws which bound him to the land he painted”. He was painting ancestral landscapes and expressing his personal and spiritual relationship with the land. Well-known and widely distributed paintings [in calendars, postcards etc.in the 1950s] such as “Ghost gum, Central Australia”, “Mt Hermannsburg”, “Mt Sonder”, and “Simpson’s Gap” 34 were images of [to Namatjira] a familiar and spiritually hospitable landscape created in the Dreaming, untamed and as yet un-polluted by the pastoral industry and other expressions of European invasion of Arrernte sacred lands. But to European Australians, the desert and Red Centre were still a hard, forbidding place.

James McAuley 35 wrote in “Envoi”:
There the blue-green gums are a fringe of remote disorder
And the brown sheep poke at my dreams along the hillsides;
And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs,
Comes the faint sterility that disheartens and derides.

Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,
A futile heart within a fair periphery...

He does go on, however, to acknowledge that “I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body”, that “I know its contractions, waste, and sprawling indolence”, and in its “artesian heart” we do not “wholly fail, though we impede” Perhaps this represents the tension felt by many non-Aboriginal Australians in relation to the Centre and its deserts, though not all would share McAuley’s sense of sterility and futility, not only of the land, but of the human spirit also. Here is a perspective, with all its harsh truthfulness, that calls out to be balanced by being seen with new eyes and inhabited [again] with people of spirit!

Again, it might take an Aboriginal artist to jolt us into such a new awareness. Wandjuk Marika 36 writes.
This land is not empty, the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. The earth is our mother,
.... There is the story I am telling you ---special, sacred, important.

It is from this landscape, at Daly River Mission in the Northern Territory, and from this spirituality, now expressed through a Christian theology, that we have Miriam Rose Ungunmerr’s 37 art works in her “Australian stations of the cross”, and her introduction to dadirri contemplation. Here is an invitation to move beyond the fear and strangeness of the desert, to a deep sense of spiritual closeness to the land, a connectedness with the very source of life, yet in the seeming virtual absence of life of any kind in the desert. But the invitation, as always on Retreat, and maybe especially so in a “barren” landscape, is to move to that place of such inner quiet and awareness, that a grain of sand can tell its story of creation, and everything, animal, vegetable and mineral, takes on a life-affirming aura of both uniqueness and connectedness. This is the desert’s gift to a contemporary retreatant.
A short list of accessible sources for illustrative examples of desert paintings includes:

- Sidney Nolan, *Desert and drought*.  
- Russell Drysdale, 1912-81.  
- Fred Williams Pilbara Series.  
- Droit & Voigt, *Fire and shadow: Spirituality in contemporary Australian art*.  
- Alison French, *Seeing the centre: The art of Albert Namatjira*.

In approaching these and other paintings, which convey the artists’ varied experiences of and perspectives on the desert, the outback and wilderness of Australia, it is important to ask “Is the artist seeking to say something about the spiritual or the numinous in this landscape painting?” More direct questions for the retreatant would be: “Given the viewer’s perspective and experience, what speaks to him/her of God’s presence/absence in this painting?” How is this conveyed artistically? Why does the viewer have this response? What does the viewer bring to and seek from this engagement with a visual depiction of this desert landscape as part of God’s creation and ongoing creative presence? [and see Figs. 5.5 and 5.6 and related comments below].

**Themes in theology and spirituality**

Belden Lane in his *The solace of fierce landscapes* commences his first chapter, “Connecting spirituality and the environment”, with a discussion of the Aboriginal lands west of Alice Springs, and his understanding of songlines as the way of entering and traversing a sacred landscape. He refers to the Aboriginal *habitus* or ritualised way of perceiving reality as they name and re-create every characteristic of the desert landscape. This is their way, not only of drawing meaning, but of safeguarding ecological sustainability. What we are calling here *dadirri* contemplation is an important element of *habitus*, in ensuring a deep listening awareness of all elements that are life-giving in the particular place/country. Alongside this, we are reminded of Denys Turner’s summary of the *habitus* of the early desert Christians, and the ongoing characteristics of the eremitical life:

- God is a desert, whose fullness of glory is hidden, known only in an ‘unknowing’ and risking of love [the apophatic way of relinquishment to mystery].
- The self is a desert, to be stripped and made empty before God can be found at its centre; the self is not ‘realised’ in prayer; the goal is “a *kenosis* [self-emptying] of the ego”.
- The realisation of God’s love at the heart of one’s being is essentially related to ascetical and liturgical practices, especially in silence and contemplative prayer, and anchored in the imitation of Christ, and in this context, the Christification of life in place and time.

While at first glance, it seems unlikely that a desert can become a ‘nourishing terrain’ for the body, let alone the spirit, this is a superficial conclusion to be challenged by the passionate seeking for the concrete meaning of Love in even the most barren, dry and wild places of the land, as of the human heart: ingrained *habits* of negation must be confronted by an openness to whatever the Spirit might bring; impoverished and self-serving understandings of *habitat* must be questioned by a call to ecological, in fact cosmic, wholeness and mutuality; and life-denying patterns of *habitus* must be addressed by recall to tried and creative practices of
spirituality, whether or not these are current within institutional religious practice. The desert, as a dramatic kataphatic image of apparent emptiness and infertility, can begin to teach us, with dadirri waiting stillness and expectancy, that there can be an apophatic route interweaving the harshest realities of heat, dryness and remoteness. We can in fact discover again that God has planted the same life-giving songline within the hearts of both the land and the people who genuinely seek God, the songline which is a veritable “love-song of the Son, hanging on a Southern Cross”.45

Related issues, but not explicitly from a Christian perspective, are taken up in David Tacey’s work, especially in *Edge of the sacred*, and *ReEnchantment*. While Tacey has been criticised for his lack of an explicit Christian theology or Christology [despite his return in recent years to the Catholic church], and some fear a “downward path” to new Age spirituality or syncretism with Aboriginal spirituality, he continues to raise important questions and to challenge Christians and non-Christians alike about what it means to take both the land, including the desert, and spiritual life seriously in Australia today. A critical reading of his recent books is helpful preparation for a retreatant or director.

Some artistic resources are mentioned above, but a couple of further examples follow::

~~Brett Whiteley’s painting of the Olgas, in Fig. 5.5 below: 47 Here desert formations are depicted as strange, mysterious, fantastic, and also as warm, sensuous, even humourous, and such a painting tends to raise more questions than answers about the connections between spirituality, landscape, and artistic sensibilities.

~~Similarly the painting at Fig.5.6, by Barrie Carson of Melbourne, 48 is appropriate for theological reflection on desert spirituality, raising questions of integration versus syncretism, dominant versus subordinate religious expressions, romanticism versus mysticism: Is this a genuine depiction of and invitation to “Spiritual reconciliation” [the title of the painting], a disturbing cultural confrontation, or are elements of both successfully held together? Does this represent a Christification of an iconic Aboriginal sacred place, a quasi-indigenisation of the crucifix, or a cosmic vision of wholeness and mutuality? Such questions are significant for Australian retreatants as they enter the physical or represented landscape of the desert.

There are many ways to describe the desert *habitus* of the heart. Jenny Wightman 49 has written of the Victorian Mallee as a source of spiritual enrichment; Chris Doyle 50 has written of a women’s pilgrimage to Uluru and a carefully structured process of deep reflection over several days, not unlike a “Pilgrimage to the heart” by Australian church leaders in 2000. 51 And there are more extended theological reflections on the desert as symbol; as confrontation with the ego; as place of passion, and deep faith; as place of personal encounter; as a place of rich and sustaining silence; as a place to enter into simplicity, waiting, adoration, and of struggle; a place to develop a theology of story and engagement; and a place of learning critically but openly from Aboriginal spirituality in what it has to teach non-indigenous Christians. 52 In this latter area, Eugene Stockton 53 offers a “contemporary asceticism” [or spiritual *habitus*] of gentleness, patience, simplicity

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and compassion, and suggests that the key points of connection for Christians lie in Aboriginal religious culture’s basis in creation, its egalitarian world view, reverence for the land, identity with the land, harmony with the land and all living things, assent to life as given, timelessness, priority of persons over things, hospitality and sharing, creative accommodation to adversity, earthy honesty, humour and celebration; and he concludes, as we do here, that *dadirri*-contemplation has the capacity to hold all these elements together, as it turns outward to the environment in awareness, and inward to the deep springs of the Spirit’s presence within us in the Word, Jesus:
The voice of one crying in the desert:

Make straight the Way of the Lord. [John 1:23].

Finally, what of the **desert and theodicy**? In what ways does the desert raise questions about the nature of God and even imply that God is not all good, all loving, all powerful? The desert in Australia, as elsewhere is clearly a place of environmental stress and a challenge to the physical survival of human beings. Many have died of drought, heat-exhaustion, lack of food and water, sometimes through being lost, sometimes due to vehicle break-down, or horses dying in earlier days, some have abandoned the safety of vehicles or companions and wandered dazed into the desert. Aboriginal people, perhaps in their many thousands, have been massacred in the desert, and others have been wrenched from tribal life and the familiarity of particular country and its *Tjukurpa*, and have died from this separation from their spiritual sustenance, as well as disease, alcohol and drugs. Peter Falconio and Azaria Chamberlain, and many others have simply vanished without trace in the desert. Then there are problems of feral animals taking over vast tracts, interfering with native flora and fauna in drastic ways and threatening the sensitive arid environment; and there are broader problems of desertification, possibly connected with climatic change and global warming. As with the coastline landscape, there are innumerable hazards to life in the desert, but the question is never “Why does God do/allow this?”, but “Where and in what way is God to be found in compassionate, loving and creative presence, in the midst of such a harsh and apparently unforgiving place?”
Fig. 5.5  Brett Whiteley, “The Olgas...soon”, 1970 [Kata Tjuta]  
Tempera over gesso with enamel, gold paint, ink, collage, possum tail, 
jaw bone & wodden boomerang. 4 wooden panels, 203 X 325 cms.  
Fig. 5.6 Barrie Carson, “Spiritual reconciliation”, Uluru, 2001.
Oil on canvas. 60 X 50 cms. Copied with permission of the artist.
Ted Snell in his painting “...Dying in the desert” [see Fig.5.7] responded to the tragic death of two young men on Sturt Creek cattle station in the north of Western Australia. Snell takes their deaths as a theme in his artistic exploration of personal and universal themes. He utilises a pattern of six images held within a grid structure, including a map-like image, representing for him the search for order and harmony even in the face of death in the desert. One of the young men described in a final pathetic note to his parents “I’ve found peece”, and Snell comments that “The idea of a transcendental experience in the desert was a powerful component of the story”, especially when he made the link between the station name and Sturt’s Desert Pea, a “native plant that requires the intense heat of the desert to enable it to propagate” --like finding “peece” after suffering the trial of the desert. Maybe “from the deserts, prophets do come” still, even at the price of death.

Retreatants, or modern-day eremites, may be located in the desert, or on the edge of the desert with a distant view of its shimmering haze and pervading red dust. Or a person may simply be contemplating this landscape in its imaging in literature or art. Pilgrims of the inner and outer journeys must seek their own responses and affirmations as they enter the beauty and the terror, the stillness, the silence, the emptiness and the waiting. As poets such Hopkins, contemplatives like Merton, and theologians such as Pannikar, have acknowledged in their different ways, how the “inscape” [imaginal interior] merges and interacts with perceptions of the exterior landscape. For Hopkins, Christ is the” first Inscape”, the “real pattern on which all things are made”, and one that “is being adumbrated by all the inscapes of this world.” Here is a vision linking the world’s nourishing if fragile terrain with the Word. A feast richer than the desert’s locusts and wild honey awaits those who truly pursue the concrete meaning of Love, in such unlikely places as the “fierce landscapes” of deserts and mountains.
Fig. 5.7 Ted Snell, “Incident XXIV – Dying in the desert”, 1990.
Oil on canvas, 189 X 120 cms. Drury & Voigt, 1999, 179.
5.2 Rivers: The Murray

Introduction: Rivers are more readily seen as a ‘nourishing terrain’ than the desert, but they can be a ‘mixed blessing’. A river system, its varied landforms and waterflows, creates a highly diversified ecological niche or corridor with foothills, valley walls, floodplain, and often a complex of changing meanders or flood-time incisions in banks and dumping of silt. A river valley is often correlated with the fluctuations in particular agricultural production, and provides a transport route for river traffic, roads and railways; floods, drought, and poor drainage add to both the physical complexity of the landscape, and also to its value and problematic for economic and social purposes. Soils tend to be rich, but also heavy to work, and it was a little higher up the slopes in drier gravel terraces or on valley flanks where human beings took the first steps toward self-sufficiency in food production, and the resulting more stable life of gathered village communities.

Despite the arid nature of so much of Australia, the continent is drained by a number of major river systems:

- Murray River, 2520 kms [NSW, SA, bordering Victoria]
- Murrumbidgee River, 1575 kms [NSW, ACT]
- Darling River, 1390 kms [NSW]
- Lachlan River, 1370 kms [NSW]

The longest continuous river system is the Murray-Darling, flowing through Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. This system occupies the major part of the interior lowlands, and covers over one million square kilometres or about 14 percent of the land area. When measured from its source in Queensland to its mouth on the coast SE of Adelaide, the system is 3,370 kms. Water availability is a major issue for Australia, and the signs are that climatic change is making at least some areas even drier. At the level of the ‘blue planet’, water is everywhere, but even coastal areas of Australia vary enormously in the capacity of their rivers to allow, let alone sustain or increase, population pressure. Australian rainfall is the most variable in the world, in so far as one can generalise for whole countries, and the duration and frequency of drought is extreme. Most of Australia’s large rivers have ceased to flow one or more times in the past 100-200 years of observations --- even the Murray-Darling system has ceased flowing at the mouth at least three times in the twentieth century, and the tropical Queensland river Burdekin ceased to flow at the end of the dry season after a record flood peak in 1958.

Geomorphology: A river has a life of its own, eroding, dumping, receding, running a ‘banker’, holding sediments and salts in suspension or releasing them, cutting away cliffs and laying down deltas. It rises from hidden springs and aquifers in the hills, and disappears ‘anonymously’ into bays and oceans, or salt pans in the Centre. Aerial photos taken over seasons, and over the decades, tell a story of the nomadic life of many rivers as they surge or retreat, and as they wander, embracing or attacking the host landscape. Some draw vegetation to cover their banks and surrounding flood plains, as with the River Red Gums and other eucalypts in the Barmah Forest along the Murray. Elsewhere salinity and sedimentation bequeath a dying landscape on a land slow to heal. The confluence of rivers with each other, or with the sea or major trade routes, has historically meant that cities, even whole civilisations, have become associated with particular rivers --- the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile, Tiber and Yangtze rivers are ancient examples, while John Batman’s “place
for a village” near the mouth of the Yarra River in 1835 established the roots of metropolitan Melbourne.

Geologists recognise three types of drainage system: \(^{60}\) areic regions where a lack of surface water results from lack of rainfall, local rock type [e.g. creating underground rivers], or both, as in the case of the Nullabor; parts of the Nullabor have subterranean or cryptoreic drainage through vast limestone caverns. Second, large areas of inland Australia are basins of interior or endoreic drainage such as the Lake Eyre Basin; streams from three states drain to the centre. Third, exoreic streams drain to the sea, as shorter faster rivers on parts of the east coast, or longer but slower systems such as the mouth of the Murray. Rivers may be constant, seasonal, intermittent, or unpredictable and episodic as with the Todd River in Alice Springs. As one reads a particular river system and its local manifestations, the quantity and quality of flows, and the landforms channelling and surrounding them, are sources of reflection into the spiritual life and its metaphors, as well as into the natural sciences. And from the spirituality map in chapter 3 here, perhaps some insights may arise from the kataphatic/exoreic and apophatic/cryptoreic and endoreic parallels? Mystery and hiddenness, image and concreteness, are held together as mind and heart prayerfully search a landscape for the quiet whispers of immanence.

As a symbolic landscape, the valley and its sustaining waters has been linked with the womb and nurture, protection and shelter. It is also a place of floods and landslides, of diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and Ross River fever in North Queensland. And like other landscapes, the valley and river in their intimate symbiosis can be read from the Book of Creation as an account of the forms and processes of both geomorphic history and human impact. Mark Twain \(^{61}\) [a pseudonym meaning two fathoms deep] was a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi, and he wrote of the surface of that river as “a wonderful book”, one that “told its mind…without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice”. I have talked with a riverboat pilot at Echuca on the Murray who told how he, like Twain and his mentor, constantly had to read the changing surface of the river, because of the shifting sand banks, drowned tree trunks and other snags ---constant vigilance on a river that the pilot may have traversed hundreds of times. The quantity and speed of flow of the water is only one among many variables ---as Twain wrote, “It was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day.”

So it is for a retreatant in a river/valley landscape, potentially with the time and attentiveness to notice the verdancy and the vagaries of the river system. As with all landscapes, the river contains layers and shifting patterns of meaning and significance. If, as we have affirmed in earlier chapters, every landscape is sacred for those with eyes to see and the heart-wisdom to know, then the river has a narrative to share: not only of its physical evolution, and its historic, social and economic changes, but of its spiritual immanence as part of God’s good creation ---here life and death are to be encountered, light and dark shift and swirl, and signals of new life are to be found in every eddy and rock pool, every flood-time and every drought. The Australian billabong or cut-off meander, is a rich metaphor for our need of living water and the “aeration” of the Spirit, not stagnation and short-lived self-sufficiency, in the spiritual, just as in the physical life. But the billabong has its

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ecological role, as a reservoir of biodiversity, and a refuge for aquatic and terrestrial
life in dry times, a breeding habitat for birds, fish and many other small creatures,
especially when the billabong is reconnected with the parent river in times of flood.
The downside is that billabongs and adjacent wetlands are often concentrators of
farmland run-off of chemical and other contamination and host to blue-green
algae. 62

Even a modest little creek can be evocative of something beyond the immediate
senses; Freya Matthews 63 in her Journey to the source of the Merri [a creek which
flows into the Yarra River in Melbourne], writes that, from her ‘childhood’s heart’,
“creeks were already charged with…primal significance for me…[a creek where
she was raised] was always full of news from upstream, especially after heavy
rains…These tidings were from places entirely unknown to me, yet to which I felt
mysteriously connected as part of the wider world that the creek created for me
…what a cold but exhilarating elementalism I felt when I paddled…in that muddy
water that the creek had laid, against the accepted order of things…making the
familiar landscape strange.” She goes on to regret the later bulldozing and
straightening of the creek, but vegetation and river life came back, and rejoices that
“The creek was not like a paddock or rock or other land form ---it did things, it told
things, it was busy and talkative and full of surprises. It was, above all, companionable.” She writes of her later trudging explorations of Merri Creek
through Melbourne suburbs as genuine pilgrimage; while not writing from a
specifically ‘religious’ viewpoint: “one follows the Way trustingly, resigning
judgementalism and control, accepting succour from any quarter…[and in return,
she] gathers in…gathers the people and places she encounters along the way into a
sacred story….a poetic unity.” Sensitive too, to the ancient Aboriginal presence
around the Yarra and Merri, Matthews compares the waterways with pre-existing
songlines, knitting the land into narrative unities, discriminating one ‘country’ from
another, but also linking them into a wholeness: “In walking a waterway…we are
already repossessing all that it had gathered into its narrative terrain.” 64

In our context, Matthews’ experience can offer insight into a way of walking a
valley, a river bank, even the source of a little creek hidden in industrial and
suburban Melbourne, in dadirri contemplation, making a pilgrimage that links the
geological story, the primordial mythic story, and the contemporary story of the
joys and pains of life today. The stories are interwoven, re-vivified and expanded,
and always open to that liminal moment of geophany when the very waters or river
banks or the curve of the valley speaks again to us of God. We can ask with her
whether anywhere would prove equally evocative and richly textured. The
perspective here is that, yes, any place is a good place to which to attend deeply to
the ongoing story of creation and salvation, wherever landscape meets humanity,
and if the listening-heart strains for sounds of God’s songlines. She asks too, “Is
pilgrimage a kind of philosopher’s stone that can open up the mythic
inexhaustibility of reality to the pilgrim heart, however seemingly banal the route
and routine the destination?” 65 The answer here is yes and no! In the absence of
a philosopher’s stone, and the inadequacy of such a conceptual framework for a
retreatant, the primordial but ever-new story of salvation history affirms that the
incarnate One willingly encounters the pilgrim whatever the route: all routes and
destinations are gathered up into the divine possibilities of this river bank, this
stepping stone at the ford, this panoramic view of the Upper Yarra Valley. Out of
intentionality of contemplation, and simply the serendipity of the Spirit, can come a ‘fluvial geophany’ and the pilgrim’s heart can be ‘strangely warmed’.

A modern classic in the natural history genre is American writer Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Written by someone who says “I am no scientist…I am a wanderer with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts”, Dillard is a deeply sensitive exponent of the art of what we call here *dadirri* contemplation, alert to the subtlest nuances of nature around her, and with a poet’s eye and ear in recording so evocatively what she observes ---an inspiration for any retreatant wondering how to begin to notice and delight in God’s good creation. Freya Matthews’ pilgrimage to the Merri Creek in Melbourne, mentioned above, has many of the qualities of Dillard’s writing, and in a natural and historic context that may strike chords with an Australian reader. Patrice Newell’s *The River* is a passionate account of the life—and illnesses—of the Pages River, a branch of the Hunter River in New South Wales. Her account is about the beauty, the natural history, and the plight and politics of sustaining a river’s ecology. She evokes the river’s complex past in geology and Aboriginal and settler history, and lays out the challenges from ‘big business’ for the future for water users, especially irrigators and small bio-dynamic farmers like herself. The book is not only about the deteriorating status of many Australian river systems, and the increasing impact on farming and life in rural areas, but deeper issues of values, priorities, and decision-making for the well-being of whole communities and the nation as a whole. Finally In George Seddon’s studies of the Swan River in Perth, and particularly the Snowy River in northeastern Victoria, he writes not only as environmental scientist on geology, natural history, and changing landuse, but significantly for our purposes on place, landscape, and ‘perceptual history’. By this he means the way a river is seen by explorers, photographers, artists, natural historians, cattlemen, miners, engineers, hydrologists and bushwalkers.

Retreatants might attempt to see their particular river landscape through some of these other eyes, and imagine the different images evoked, and other elements put aside. Writing environmental history raises the problem of what Seddon calls “the linearity of language, where I wanted a polyphonic account”. The landscape itself has many voices, and ‘participant-observers’ like retreatants have the challenge, first of acknowledging and identifying the many voices present in a specific landscape, and of then ‘tuning in’ to those of special interest for their purposes: where are the voices of the creator of the cosmos, the redeemer of creation, and the breather of stillness into chaos to be found in this river landscape? Where the very existence of the Snowy, like many other Australian rivers, is under threat from human impact and environmental change, what words are arising from the land and from God’s presence in this part of creation, and what are they saying to those who are still, alert, and aware enough? And how might this touch our minds, hearts and actions?

The Murray River: de Courcy and Johnson have recently published *River tracks: Exploring Australian rivers*. While there are many travel and holiday guides available, this book has the advantage of providing summaries of the history and physical and settlement characteristics of six river systems: the Upper and Lower Murray, the Murrumbidgee, Goulburn, Darling, and Cooper Creek. The range of information provided is helpful background for a wilderness or town-based retreat
on any of these river systems, and provides a model too for what would be helpful in other areas where the river landscape is to be the focus.

While much has been written specifically on the Murray over the years, a recent book lays out a rich contextualisation of this vast river. As Paul Sinclair puts it in his book *The Murray*, “Memory and emotional attachment are as much a part of the Murray as fish, irrigation and flood”. His particular interests are in the history of the unregulated and regulated river, harnessing the waters, ‘stories of abundance and decline’, the significance of fish in the river’s story [including the catastrophic invasion of European carp], and the degradation of the system in recent decades.  

The Aboriginal presence for at least 40,000 years is part of the story. The river was known as Millewa by some, and it figured in their spiritual traditions as Provider, and was the focus of many floodplain communities prior to European settlement. On the other hand, by the use of fire they significantly altered floodplain forests and grasslands, and river-bank middens still attest to their harvesting of a wide range of flora and fauna ---“If aboriginals lived in harmony with nature it was not without effect, and less by choice than necessity”. So-called ‘fire-stick’ farming’ is now understood to be a deliberate use of fire “to promote the well-being of particular types of eco-systems”. 

![Canoe tree scar, Murray River environs.](http://users.csc.net.au/~pereilly/roonka.htm)

Trees carved for ceremonial purpose [confined to NSW and SE-Qld; see Fig. 5.8] are to be distinguished from scarred trees which have been used for shields, containers and canoes. Eucalypts with scars from the removal of bark for canoes are a disappearing feature of the landscape around the Murray-Darling Basin, as the trees are burnt in bushfires, fall to disease or age, or are removed for timber or farm clearance. Those that remain hold not just an archaeological record, but provide an image of journeys pursued in the midst of life, and most significantly, the
symbiosis of the eucalypt forest with the riverine landscape and the “simplest”
technology of transport within the complexity of Aboriginal community life. It is
of interest [but to my knowledge, unexplained], that the scarring of the trees is
generally on the side away from the river. Taking fire-stick farming or canoe tree-
scarring as metaphor, how does a landscape contribute to, and become marked by,
our journeys through it? Is the symbiosis of our presence only temporarily or
permanently scarring to the landscape? Is tree scarring solely negative in
implication, or metaphorically, can it convey something of the meaning of having
God’s image, or Christ’s suffering, or the workings of the Spirit, carved into our
lives? In a contemplative Retreat context, what is it that “carries” us on the journey
in a particular landscape, and how might the hospitality and gifting of that
landscape be celebrated?

Hume and Hovell in 1824 were the first Europeans to travel along the river, but it
was Charles Sturt in 1830 who named it the Murray. Pastoralists and squatters then
began to move into the region to establish large stations.76 Steam navigation from
the early 1850s assisted the spread of settlement and coincided with the demands
imposed by the Victorian goldfields. In the nineteenth century, paddle-steamers
carried wool, wheat and other goods the greater length of the Murray, and as far as
the Darling junction, until the introduction of railways, and the shift to irrigation
started by Chaffey in 1887; then the ‘Riverland’ became the orchard for much of
southern Australia. 77

Fig. 5.9  The Murray River at Swan Hill, Victoria.
Caravan Park location of joint Mallee/Loddon-Campaspe Presbyteries
Retreat, April 2004. Traditional country of the Wemba Wemba people;
At the end of his study of the Murray, Sinclair acknowledges the serious deterioration of the river, and the lack of a political will to pay the costs of its revivification ---if such were possible. He hopes that more Australians might “vigorously defend the species, qualities and places that link to the old Murray. Settler [non-indigenous] Australians need to understand and mourn the immense losses they have inflicted on the river. They need to recognise the stories within their own culture that can help them imagine a new future for the Murray.”

Here is an excellent theme for a retreatant imagining God’s new future around the rich metaphor of the ‘river of life’. This is not to side-track the genuine call to some to become active in local and wider action and environmental groups as a profound outcome from their spiritual insights and sensitivity to the fragility of a sense of place.

The biblical river

Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys;  
They flow between the hills,  
They give drink to every beast of the field;  
The wild asses quench their thirst.  
By them the birds of the air have their habitation;  
…the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work.
---Psalm 104: 10-13, RSV

In earlier sections on the coastal and desert landscapes, quite brief mention was made of biblical textual resources; the material here and in Appendix 5.2 illustrates the possibilities of a more extensive culling of references, with the proviso that care is taken by a retreatant to ensure that the diverse contexts [literary and theological, as well as geographic] are recognised and valued. The biblical material on rivers, physical, social and metaphorical, provides a rich ‘reservoir’ for reflection, both as to its scriptural significance, and as a lens through which to view a particular river landscape, the livelihood of its inhabitants, and where God’s voice may be heard in its flows, its changing courses, and its floods and droughts. Appendix 5.2 lists biblical material as follows:

- Biblical terminology for rivers;
- The many roles served by rivers;
- Rivers as metaphors of destruction, cleansing, drinking, fruitfulness and refreshment.

While there are limitations in using this approach [the trap of ‘proof-texting’ for example], retreatants may be invited/guided to explore themes through metaphor, and the life-connections they can make through themes of waters of destruction, cleansing, sustenance and refreshment. Journalling, imaginative writing and visual depiction are part of the invitation, to encourage the articulation of the retreatant’s own responses to the varied voices of scripture speaking into their own life-circumstances.

From the abundance of biblical commentary material relevant here, I mention only these: the ‘water world’ and stories of wells in Genesis, an example of the Earth Bible perspective in attempting to read the bible from the earth’s point of view; ‘Streaming waters’, an exploration of biblical images relating to stories of creation,
conflict, deliverance, repentance, rejection, invitation, healing, and praise; and a book which explores, inter alia, the place of rivers from a Christian eco-theological standpoint. Each offers a retreatant a different biblical perceptual map for riverine theological reflection.

Literary, film, and artistic representation of rivers: Appendix 5.3 contains a brief illustrative list of resources for reflection drawn from films, novels, poetry and meditative prayer themes on Australian and some other rivers. Any one, or a sampling of these, offers a creative and complementary focus for theological, social and critical reflection, alongside the biblical material. From an artist’s perspective, rivers can be places of portrayed with relative tranquillity, as with Streeton’s “The purple noon’s transparent might” [1896; see Fig.5.10]. Streeton was 29 when he painted this in two hot days on the Hawkesbury River. The title comes from a poem by Percy Shelley, and Streeton wrote to Tom Roberts that he was going “straight inland...[to] translate some of the great hidden poetry that I know is here”. Contemporary critics noted “the fervour of the painting...Nature has been rendered with passion rather than the long patience of genius, and with a sensuous charm....” The painting is about Australia’s light and heat, juxtaposed with tranquil blues of the river and the distant Blue Mountains, and the viewer is drawn into a journey into the panorama. This is both an artistic perspectival device, and potentially an invitation theologically to explore what is opaque and distant: the strong and mirrored colours of the river in the foreground merge to soft haziness, the kataphatic to an apophatic ‘beyond’, the rural farm to sublime grandeur however lightly portrayed.

Rivers are also places of devastation in times of flood. Sometimes the landscape and agricultural production may recover, sometimes the damage brings more radical change both to land forms and land use. At other times, flooding triggers forest regrowth, as along the Murray in the Barmah Forest, or a seasonal flourishing of wildflowers, frogs, and other small animals in inland lakes and waterways. Piguent’s “The flood in the Darling” [see Fig. 5.11] has both an air of solitude, and a moody elemental presence of sky and water. There are the warning signs of rain clouds and further flooding, as well as feeding waterbirds and still reflections; for the time being there is stillness and mystery, and foreboding in nature. There is little hint here of the actual destruction that vast sheets of flood water can cause, though the eye is drawn to the ominous skyline. The picture mirrors Henry Lawson’s “The song of the Darling River”.

...I have watered the barren land ten leagues wide!
   But in vain have I tried, ah!, in vain I have tried
   To show the sign of the great All Giver,
   The Word to a people: O lock your river”.

Evocative river paintings in other sources include Kenneth Jack’s “The Diamantina”, and “ Mirage, Lake Eyre”; paintings of the pioneering presence on rivers, such as the series on the punt at Echuca on the Murray in the 1860s; for a more industrial river scene, there is Walter Withers “Moonrise on the Yarra”; and for more recent renderings of river landscapes, the strong lines and colours of Brett Whiteley, as in “The river at Marulan”, “Blue river”, “Summer at Carcoar”, and “The river”. Themes of serenity and foreboding are common ones.
Fig. 5.10  Arthur Streeton, “The purple noon’s transparent night”, 1896.
Hawkesbury River to the Blue Mountains, NSW. Oil on canvas, 122 X 122 cms.
Geoffrey Dutton, 1987, 40
Fig. 5.11  WG Piguent, “The flood in the Darling, 1890”, 1895
Oil on canvas, 123 X 199 cms.  Tim Bonyhady, 2000, 280.
Themes in theology and spirituality: Many relevant themes have already been mentioned. Even a scientific text can trigger reflection on significant themes. Twidale’s geomorphology of rivers and valleys mentions the Murray River’s survival in semi-arid deserts, its collection of water from innumerable tributaries large and small, its sharp turn south at Morgan in response to the presence of fault escarpments, and then it follows a course through South Australia influenced by fault zones and jointing in the country rock. Metaphorically there are questions here about the barriers and ‘faults’ which determine the courses our lives take, and the degree to which we are willing and able to ‘cut through’ such barriers of our own or others’ making. And where is God in this analogy? Not, we affirm, in causing the ‘faults’ to test or divert our course, but certainly in the power with which we may be graced to face the difficult terrains of life.

John O’Donohue writes that “The grace of a river is a reminder of how nature seeks elegance and achieves immense beauty of cohesion and balance. A river blends music of movement with an enduring and accompanying depth of stillness. …its journey is always out of silence…If only our lives could…find a rhythm of being which could balance a contemplative grace, a poetry of motion and an accompanying stillness and silence…our pilgrimage… would flow through the most ragged and forsaken heartlands of confusion and dishevelment…and never lose the passion of flowing towards the ever new promise of the future”. Robin Allen explores a ‘parable of interaction’ between rivers and the land, and the life of the church. Digby Hannah has taken the river as a metaphor of learning in the Christian life, in his experience of camping retreats with young people on the Powlett River. Developing an idea in Estes’ book Women who run with the wolves, he takes the notion of ‘the river under the river’ which represents the human spirit which can flow creatively or be blocked; his aim is to help retreatants be open to God-given ways of purifying and renewing the flows of these creative streams.

Margaret Silf uses her experience of the River Tweed in the UK to invite reflection on life’s spiritual journey; her graphic, in Fig. 5.12, is helpful for retreatants who are more visually than verbally oriented in receiving encouragement in their contemplation of a river landscape, actual or imagined. Her depiction is however, of a very English landscape, needing contextualisation ‘downunder’.

In essence the retreatant in the riverine landscape is encouraged to [re] discover the concrete meaning of Love in the particular setting, not in some mental exercise ‘out there’, but in an engagement of the heart and spirit with this Christified place, this realm in which the individual shares breathing space for a few days with the One who is pneuma. A retreat leader/spiritual companion has the responsibility of prayerfully discerning what will be most helpful to a retreatant at any given stage of the process they share, but broad themes may include addressing questions such as: Where is God to be found in the layers of evolving history and ecology here? Where is God moving within a retreatant’s life, his or her family or friends’ network, their community of faith, and how might he/she cross a liminal threshold here to discover the grace which will empower their relationships with God, self, and others? As retreatants walk along this river bank, view the valley from a vantage point, or navigate their kayak along this living stretch of water, to whom do they turn to as Navigator, and to what flow do they wish to commit the next stage of their journey?
River landscapes and theodicy: It is clear that while rivers have their natural beauty and richness in metaphor, they have a powerful ‘downside’, especially in a country like Australia where water is so scarce, even for the existing population and landuse demands. There are issues of quality as well as quantity. Headlines like “Bacteria-riddled river 22 times over safe level” [The Yarra], “Is this the red gum forests’ last stand?” and “Flooded Murray gums dying of thirst” [the Murray], “River’s health threatened by city’s thirst” [Thomson River dam in Gippsland], and “Terrestrial runoff and the Great Barrier Reef” [where catchments and river systems in Queensland have been heavily modified by logging, agriculture and urban development], these point collectively to a pervasive problem other than insufficiency of runoff. Periodic devastating floods inland as well as on the coast, pollution from city storm water entering many rivers, unexplained fish kills, blue-green algae… the list is endless.

Fig. 5.12 Reflecting on the [English] river landscape as the spiritual journey of life. Margaret Silf, Landmarks, 1989, 49.
Again, the question must be faced by a thoughtful and concerned retreatant: Where is God in this ‘mess’? Is there a malfunction in creation? Or is there a growing and urgent challenge for concerned people, retreatants “away from it all” included, to not only discern and analyse the problem, but face the call to eco-justice for the rivers themselves, and not just out of self-interest as water-consumers? Or is God Deus absconditus, “absent without leave” from a creation in Again, the question must be faced by a thoughtful and concerned dire need of an overhaul? Einstein is reported to have said “God is subtle…but not malicious…nature conceals her mystery by means of her essential grandeur, not by her cunning.”

In the midst of floods and droughts, pollution and drownings, the creating Spirit of God continues to bring new life ex nihilo and to empower with new visions of possibilities those who momentarily found themselves swamped or dragged down. Loss and grief are a part of the human life-landscape, but “the sufferings of the present time” [Rom. 8:18] are felt and wept over by God as well as ourselves, and that is why they “are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed”. River landscapes, like the whole of creation/cosmos, are part of the eschatological statement of the God who created all that is, and who calls all into God’s own new future.

5.3 Other landscape realms

Much has been written on the Australian bush, an overwhelming theme of the “Australian legend” for much of the nineteenth and half the twentieth century. It still holds powerful sway in our literature and art but perhaps is fading as a monolithic national myth. But mountains and high plains, forests and dry woodlands continue to draw people to live in, produce from, or walk through their sometimes beautiful and sometimes scrubby landscapes. Bushwalking, rock-climbing, down-hill and cross-country skiing, white water rafting, mountain bike trails, these and many other leisure pursuits are part of the way of life of this ‘lucky country’s’ population. As Belden Lane has shown so powerfully in his The solace of fierce landscapes, mountains and the bush in North America, and equally if not more so in Australia, are landscapes which speak deeply to the human psyche and spirit. Many Australian Retreat houses are located in mountain or bush areas, so the invitation to explore the numinous in their settings is readily available. They are also the locus of grass fires and sometimes devastating bushfires, of injury and becoming lost, of heat exhaustion or hypothermia, places which require caution, respect and preparation for incursions into their fierceness.

Another major landscape not addressed in this study is that of the city, which houses such a major proportion of this highly urbanised country’s population. The city is a landscape like others that have been discussed here: it rests on a layered geological story which sometimes gains control; it hides middens and ancient hunting and gathering places in plains and valleys where Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years, and early settlers for a hundred or so, marked the place with their habitations and their hopes. Even the skyline of the contemporary city can be read as a landscape of hills and valleys, of flows and blockages, of light and dark, or noisy diverting places, and soft green spaces of contemplation. The city is marked by overt signs of religious institutions with its churches and cathedrals, with markers of ritual celebration or remembrance with its war memorials and cemeteries and roadside shrines to those killed in “accidents”. It also has its social problems of disease and injustice, its pollution of air, land and water, the dangers of
fire and flooding, and the rich possibilities of “street retreats” and downtown gardens and quiet spaces for reflection in the midst of the noise and bustle. God is to be found, and seeks us out, in the midst of the “wilderness” of the modern city, as in any other landscape. Here are landscapes of equal importance as Retreat environments. The Spirit of God moves and breathes new life across them all, and yearns for ever more seekers and searchers to discover in these places, and all places in all times, the concrete meaning of Love. “Pools of silence” are to be found in the mountain ranges, the bush, and the city, just as in coastal regions, the desert and river valleys; the insatiable thirst of humanity for the numinous may be quenched in any of these landscapes, by those willing to take the time and space for dadirri contemplation, and to be open to reading, hearing and seeing God in the message which is already there, but bursting to issue in new life.

Conclusion
The issues relating to development of a Retreat ministry in desert, river and other landscapes broadly parallels those canvassed regarding coastal locations in chapter 4. The focus is the conceptual and perceptual, rather than being precisely programmatic or oriented to specific content. The way Retreat ministry is framed here in particular landscape realms invites the director or leadership team to have ‘done their homework’ and be well prepared in their understanding of:

1. The local and regional physical landscape characteristics of the Retreat setting, with at least basic knowledge of its geology, physiographic forms, settlement and land use history, and Aboriginal presence, past and present. An evolutionary and process-oriented understanding of creation is basic to the background assumptions and theological orientation here.

2. Landscape as symbol and metaphor, and as an imagined, perceived and experiential image, even more than it is ‘objective fact’. Its very subjectivity, as revealed in paintings, poetry and fiction, even in photography and immediate live observation, is a call to thoughtful reflection on what is being depicted/viewed, why this has been chosen, and what may at first pass unnoticed or be rejected from the framing.

3. Retreat ministry as an educational and spiritually formational experience, and an invitation to a retreatant to make deeper connections: between God and their practice of prayer; between their practice of prayer and the particular landscape and wider creation on which they have ‘come to rest’ for these days; and between prayer, landscape and theological reflection on the biblical or other themes being offered;

4. A balance being desirable within a given retreat program, so that attention to, indeed immersion into, the specific physical landscape [be it desert, river valley, coastline or city block] enhances and illuminates one’s appreciation of God’s active and life-giving presence there; the intention is to “find God in all places, all things, and all people” in the Retreat experience;

5. A sensitivity to retreatants’ different and complex life histories, psychologies and spiritualities [as these may be revealed in course of group interaction or in one-to-one spiritual companioning], in so far as these may make them more or less open to an engagement with the Retreat themes, the physical landscape setting, and their practices of prayer, theological reflection and creative expression.
Much has been written on the “art and craft” of spiritual direction/companioning --- here, this form of ministry and sensitive pastoral encounter are interwoven with the invitations and challenges of the landscape, for the retreatant to

- “Walk within the fire of ceaseless prayer”;
- Discover “pools of silence” in this specific thirsty land; and
- Re-discover the concrete meaning of Love, at this time, in this place, among these people.
Endnotes:  

Chapter 5

4 Chisholm, op. cit., 22-25.
9 See Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics, 1992, Park notes: The geology of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Park Note Series 3; extensive scientific surveys are reported in: Ian Sweet & Ian Crick, 1992, The geological history of Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics, Canberra.
17 See the example of Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri’s painting “Napperby death spirit Dreaming”, in Helen Watson, op. cit., 42; this painting from Papunya in Central Australia is “on a canvas 7 metres long, [and shows] a central stylised songline and depicts many of the Dreamings which pass through the artist’s country”.


20 The artist’s country”.

22 Serle, op. cit., 232; the quotation is from AD Hope, 1954, “Australian literature and the universities”, Meanjin, 2, 167. [cited in Serle, 260, fn.41].
26 Krim Benterrak et al., 1984, Reading the country: Introduction to nomadology, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle; Nomadology is a way of looking which is specific to place, a way of representing things in discontinuous fragments, an aesthetic/political stance.
34 Reproductions included in Mackenzie, op. cit., but for a wider collection see French, op. cit.
40 Fred Williams: The Pilbara Series, 2000, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne; and [same title], 2002, Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
45 From a prayer by the writer.
51 “The pilgrimage to the heart”, *In Unity*, July-August, National Council of Churches in Australia, 4-5.
52 At least four websites currently offer information on desert retreats/pilgrimages of one form or another in Australia:

David Amery, “Ecospirituality tours of North Finders Ranges”, Anglican Dioces of Willochra, SA, [www.diowillochra.org.au](http://www.diowillochra.org.au) and link to ecospirituality; email dac1@bigpond.com

Dean Drayton, “Spirit Journeys” to Central Australia, [www.desertjourneys.com](http://www.desertjourneys.com); email spiritjourneys@pnc.com.au

Eileen Marchmont, “Gatherings”, Pilgrimage to Lake Mungo National Park, NSW; email gather@alphalink.com.au

David and Sue Woods, “Campfire in the heart”, Alice Springs, [www.users.on.net/~mdwoods](http://www.users.on.net/~mdwoods) email woods@campfireintheheart.com.au


57 Scott, op. cit., 112.


On Australian wetlands, see Climate Action Network Australia website: [www.cana.net.au/bush/wetlands.htm](http://www.cana.net.au/bush/wetlands.htm)

59 Climatic change is causing reduction in river flows in many rivers in southern Australia, because of less rainfall in winter, and greater rates of evaporation; by 2050, there is expected to be a 12-35% reduction in mean flow into the Murray-Darling Basin (Pitcock & Wratt, 2001), cited on Climate Action Network Australia website, *op. cit.*, 1.

60 Mick Fleming, 1995, “Australian water resources are different”, *Australasian Science*, 16, 2, Winter, 8-10.


66 *Idem*, 41.
68 Seddon, Landprints, op. cit., 55-57.
69 Idem, 58.
73 Sinclair, idem. On Aboriginal pre-history of the Lower Murray River, see Peter Reilly’s website [http://users.esc.net.au/~pereilly/geol_rv.htm] a related site gives a useful synopsis of the geological and climatic sequence for the Murray Valley in South Australia from 35,000 BP to the present: [http://users.esc.net.au/~pereilly/geo2_rv.htm]
74 Deborah Bird Rose, 1996, Nourishing terrains: Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 63; the term ‘fire-stick farming’ was coined by pre-historian Rhys Jones, 1969, “Fire-stick farming”, Australian Natural History, 16, 7, 224-228.
76 For a history of pastoral settlement see [now out of print] Samuel Woodham et al., 1957, Land utilization in Australia, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
78 Idem, 334.
80 Laura Hobgood-Oster, 2000, “‘For out of that well the flocks were watered’: Stories of wells in Genesis”, in Norman Habel & Shirley Wurst, The Earth story in Genesis, Sheffield Press, Sheffield, 187-199.
82 Susan Bratton, 1993, op. cit., 344 [index page].
83 The quotations are from Janet Clark & Bridget Whitelaw, 1985, Golden summers, op. cit., 146. The painting was the first Streeton purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria. There is an extended critique of this painting by Barry Pearce, 1988, “Deluge of pitiless silence” in Daniel Thomas [ed.], Creating Australia: 200 years of art 1788-1988, Art Gallery of South Australia & International Cultural Corporation of Australia Ltd. 104-105.
84 Tim Bonyhady The colonial earth, op.cit., 281.
86 Leigh Astbury, 1985, City bushmen: The Heidelberg school and the rural mythology, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 54; the paintings are by Nicholas Caire, “The punt, Echuca” [late 1860s]; JH Carse, “The punt, Echuca” [1869]; JC Armytage, “The punt, Echuca” [1873]; and artist unknown, “Crossing the Murray at Echuca punt” [1874].
87 Walter Withers, “Moonlight on the Yarra” [1908, oil on wood panel]; Geelong Art Gallery available as large postcard.
88 Brett Whiteley, in Barry Pearce, 1995, Brett Whiteley: Art and life, Thames & Hudson, Sydney, The compiler comments [196] for Whiteley’s landscapes, “Repetition of certain motifs symbolised states of mind: the arabesques of rivers echoed the flight path of birds, which in turn represented the artist’s relaxed journey through his own domain”.


Quoted in Annie Dillard, *op. cit.*, 7.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Summary of this study
6.2 Theological reflection
6.3 Challenges & opportunities

Geography is simply a visible form of theology
--Jon Levenson

Introduction
As outlined in chapter 1, this study seeks to respond to the call expressed in James McAuley’s “Letter to John Dryden” for a new and prayerful spirituality, one that is to be deeply em-placed within the Australian landscape, and one that might “set pools of silence in this thirsty land”; “raise up contemplatives”; call people to “ceaseless prayer”, that “works unseen like radium in the dark”; and find expression in “outward works of grace”, empowering one to live out with “impetuous desire” a life centred on the incarnate Christ, finding and responding to God and neighbour in all of life.

More specifically in terms of ministry development, the response to McAuley’s call is framed within the strictly limited goal of developing Retreat leadership and themes that pay particular attention to the landscape realms within which Retreats are conducted in this land. Assuming that God is to be encountered in both space and time, what difference might place, or one’s perception of it as part of God’s creation, make to a Retreat experience? If one is called to discover and live-out the concrete meaning of Love in particular places [where else can it be discovered and lived incarnationally?], then prayerful attention to and theological reflection on the very physicality of those particular places is important and offers some challenging insights. This is how “Geography [can become] a visible form of theology”, though the assumptions, nature and purpose of the theology involved need to be carefully explored.

The methodology adopted here has been theoretical rather than pragmatic, exploratory rather than programmatic, conceptual and perceptual rather than experiential and analytical, and hopefully evocative rather than didactic. The main tools have involved a reading and reflection on Christian traditions of spirituality, prayer and Retreat ministry, and an illustrative offering of resources and insights from biblical and theological studies, brief reference to geological and other natural sciences, and literary and artistic resources relating to Australian landscapes, especially coastal, desert, and riverine...
regions. One organising principle and theological assumption is that “landscape has memory”, whether this be in relation to the multi-layered evolution of the geological and physiographic landscape, as indeed of the cosmos [the Book of Creation], as expressed in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and studies in these [the Book of Scripture], or in relation to the subsequent “layering” of human presence and endeavours. These may be sourced in history and archaeology, botany and landuse, Aboriginal arrival and survival, and mythic and more Western modes of understanding and engaging with the land, however the holy, sacred and numinous might be expressed. This is a large canvas, concerned with exploring relevant themes and resources, and is purposely not focussed on specific Retreat programs and topics, nor the evaluation of such programs and outcomes as perceived by Retreat leaders or retreatants.

6.1 Summary
Chapter 2, “Retreat ministry: Discovering the concrete meaning of Love”, was introduced with Ann Lewin’s poem referring to the “flash of brightness” of the kingfisher’s flight as a metaphor for the yearned for, but sometimes unexpected and liminal, experience of God’s Love in the midst of one’s life experiences. From an outline of the origins and more recent developments of Retreat ministry, a foundation for the ongoing development of this ministry was proposed based, first, on five dimensions of prayer as the core “offering” of a retreat leader to retreatants; second, on the nature and role of theological reflection within the Retreat context, and its contribution to deepening the processes of prayerful discernment and personal decision-making; and third, the specific role of the Retreat leader as spiritual companion to the retreatant, but one who is constantly pointing to the true ‘spiritual director’, the incarnate, crucified, risen Christ who accompanies us on the journey, breaks open the bread of revelation, and who is himself the journey ---the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

From this base, a general process model of Retreat ministry is offered in a diagrammatic and visual depiction of the key components of Retreat leadership [Fig. 2.3]. Some possible “lenses” for theological reflection and spiritual companionship are offered as foci for the deepening and enhancement of the retreatant’s prayerful attention to the Spirit’s inner movements and outer challenges. The “lens” of geographic environment as noted at this point as one of many possible emphases, but one which becomes the focus in chapters 4 and 5. The motivation in retreatants of an open expectancy and alertness to the movements of the Spirit in all of life, and at this time and place, is integral to the ministry offered in Retreats, and some of the implications for leadership are summarised in the conclusion.

Chapter 3 takes the preceding introduction to Retreat ministry, and seeks to identify assumptions, and further possibilities, as to the nature of spirituality and spiritual formation in the Retreat context. The ministry of Retreat leadership as a way of responding to the “soul’s thirst for the living God” is explored in a number of ways.

1. The clarification of the usage here of the terms spirituality and spiritual formation.
2. The relevance of notions of ritual, processes of transition, and the place of *communitas* or community building in a group Retreat.

3. The idea of pilgrimage as both “mobile retreat” [geographic journey across and to a place/landscape of perceived special significance], and simultaneously as “interior journey” as the retreatants are encouraged to deepen their encounter with God’s presence in the midst of life experiences, inner and outer, and to hold these together as one unifying discovery of the concrete meaning of Love.

4. A general process model of on-going spiritual formation in the Retreat experience, drawing on insights of ethnographer van Gennep and theologian Lonergan, among others.

5. The development of a “spirituality map” from Holmes’ and Foster’s respective work on a phenomenology of prayer, as a way of offering a “big picture” and inclusive approach for Retreat leaders to the rich diversity of Christian spiritual traditions and contemporary spirituality; there is a particular interest in the apophatic/kataphatic spectrum of the map, in relation to the significance of place/landscape in the Retreat experience.

6. Taking seriously the contextualisation of theological reflection in both time and place, and notably in the Australian cultural and spiritual context at this time; because prayer and spiritual formation occur within the specifics of a given location [national or regional], as well as and essentially in the presence of the Spirit of the incarnate Christ, attention to trends in and critique of contextual theologies is necessary backgrounding for Retreat leaders.

7. The idea that contextual theology [macro emphasis] is helpfully focussed in attention to the locus of a particular Retreat in a specific natural landscape [micro-emphasis], and ways in which prayer and discernment can be coloured, and indeed enhanced, by the geographic environment of the Retreat.

8. The contribution of *dadirri* contemplation, drawing on an Aboriginal Christian spirituality of the land, to prayer and Retreat ministry in the Australian landscape.

These eight considerations provide background to the following two chapters which examine three broad Australian landscape realms for their potential as settings for Retreat ministry in specific geographic locales.

Chapters 4 and 5 are grouped under the heading of “nourishing” terrains, a term used by a nineteenth century colonial poet, and by a contemporary writer on Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness. The purpose is to outline Retreat themes relevant to discovering “pools of silence” and pursuing the discovery of the concrete meaning of Love in God’s good creation, in three illustrative landscape realms, coastal areas [chapter 4], and deserts and rivers [chapter 5]. These can only be illustrative of the type of approach envisaged
for a whole range of natural landscapes which cannot be discussed in the available space here, such as mountains, high plains, the bush, the wilderness of the modern city, and so on.

Different emphases and sources are adopted in the two chapters, as the aim is to introduce a diversity of interwoven themes and resources, rather than some objective template for Retreat programs and planning, which, by their very purpose, must be flexibly adapted to specific regional and local landscape milieu, as well as to the interests of leaders and retreatants. The metaphor and scientific insights inherent in the notion of “landscape memory” are utilised to draw out a richly-textured portrayal of the potential impact of specific landscapes on a Retreat program, and on the geographically nuanced prayer and discernment of a retreatant. The “layers” of the landscape’s memory include the geological structure and processes of emergence into present landforms, biblical and theological material relating to coasts, rivers and deserts, some insights from Aboriginal Dreaming and historic presence, and the use of examples from Australian art, poetry and fiction. The aim is to demonstrate the hints, or strong engagement, of these creative endeavours in the collective search for expressions of the numinous in the landscape.

The ministry implications of the two chapters are broadly similar in that they highlight a Retreat leader’s necessary familiarisation with the landscape specific to a Retreat setting, and even more importantly, a familiarisation with ways of deepening a retreatant’s discernment and engagement with the natural environment as a source of spiritual nourishment. Dadirri contemplation was offered in chapter 3 as a helpful way of prayerful attention to the Spirit’s presence in the particular terrain at a given time. The themes of landscape evolution, theological reflection and spiritual formation culminate in the lived-prayer of incarnatio. The prevalence of “natural hazards” [rather than “disasters”] may require a Retreat leader to address issues of theodicy and this is an area of particular theological and prayerful preparation, as some retreatants may find such issues especially difficult.

In summary, for each of the landscape realms discussed, it is evident that the Retreat leader/s should become cognizant of a number of issues or themes, including the physical landscape setting of the Retreat or pilgrimage; the exploration of landscape as symbol and metaphor; the spiritual-formational focus of Retreats, whatever their physical setting; the prayerful intention to find God in all aspects of the Retreat program, prayer, setting, and community [or individual relationship with the leader on solo]; and the often complex histories which retreatants themselves bring to the experience, and the need for the leader/s to honour the different backgrounds, and recognise how these help to explain different levels or forms of engagement with themes and settings by retreatants. Diverse spiritualities, theological assumptions, and life experiences ensure different responses to the same nourishing terrain.

6.2 Theological reflection on the discourse
The “presence and memory” of landscape can be read in many ways, including the biblical and theological as well as the physical and stratigraphic. The tradition of lectio divina here converges with dadirri contemplation as a
shared approach to reading scripture, landscape and the experiences of one’s life. Place and landscape are not neutral, but verbal constructs of visual expressions of geological and historical change, and equally of human constructions of reality, subjective perceptions, and theological presuppositions. Landscape is a cultural symbol or image which may be understood as “text”, and its representation and interpretation as an exercise in hermeneutical “reading”. There is an important metaphorical link here too, with “this do in memory of me”, the anamnesis, the making-present of the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist [I Cor. 11:24] ---a vital marker in the theological landscape of Christianity, and in the Spirit’s constant presence with us in daily life.

The notion of landscape as icon, as in Cosgrove’s work, reminds us that art historians seek to probe the meaning of icons by setting them in their historical context, and analysing the visual depiction of the inherent aesthetic and theological significance of these “windows on eternity”. This is at least one step removed from the icon writers themselves whose every brush-mark is a prayer offered as they immerse themselves in the spirituality of the persons and spatio-temporal context depicted. Icons are carriers of a theological and liturgical text, encoded to be deciphered by those within the culture they affirm but not readily understood [and often misunderstood] by others.

There has been a move to distinguish between iconography as the conveying of conventional religious symbology such as in Andrei Rublev’s “The Holy Trinity”, and iconology which probes a “deeper stratum” of meaning ---a somewhat controversial note in art criticism; nevertheless it seeks to “excavate” intrinsic but sub-terranean meaning in richly complex visual texts. Iconology then, seeks symbolic values and allegorical renderings, but even more, a sense of the forces moulding and revealing the world and purposes of the icon. The connection with our theme here is that a landscape can be approached and interpreted as an epiphany, a revelation, of the moulding forces of creation, in a theological as well as a geological or historical sense. Its deeper strata of meaning will depend on the particular purposes at hand, but it may be “read” as mentioned above as lectio divina, as the “book of creation”, as a liturgical text, as a revelation of Incarnation, and as the locus of God’s dealings with humankind. The iconography of the landscape may point us to conventional notions of creation, but perhaps an iconology of landscape invites us into deeper explorations of the cosmic meaning and purpose of creation and Incarnation. A cautionary note ---perhaps either approach runs the risk in this postmodern world of appearing to impose order and stability in the midst of perceived chaos, and of seeking and projecting a kataphatic rather than an apophatic notion of God who is both and neither.

The concept of topophilia links sentiment, memory, the sensual, and imagination with place, and is broadly defined as denoting all our human affective ties with and responses to the landscape. In the light of this study, perhaps choraphilia is a more appropriate term. Our “love of place” may have its source, for example, in a sense of aesthetic beauty, sometimes sudden, sometimes “dawning”;

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In terms of the spirituality map in chapter 3, place and landscape initially appear to fall primarily in the kataphatic and cognitive quadrant of the spectra, but when we begin to consider the subjective and existential, the emotional and the awe-filled responses to many vistas, we must conclude that the symbolic and affective dimensions of place can be as striking as the more objective and naturalistic. An holistic approach to landscape, whether from the social and humane sciences and literary expressions, including theology, or from the supposedly more rigorous physical sciences, becomes essential if the participant-observer is to comprehend the way he or she is constructing perceptions, and especially so if the interest is focussed on the landscape as symbol, metaphor or vehicle for revelations of the Spirit’s presence and movements. Poetry, the visual arts, naturalistic description, and theological reflection oriented to landscape, indeed to creation as a cosmic whole, necessarily draw on many elements. The goal here has been the progressive deepening of theological reflection at the interface of other modes of knowing and responding, to invite the retreatant on the journey from articulating a “sense of place”, towards a “sensing of the Spirit’s activity in this place”. In a given physical landscape, the components of this transition may include facets such as:

- the toponymic, where significant naming moves beyond mere spatial co-ordinates, to characterise something of the attributes or origins of [or person remembered by] the place so named;
- the topophilic, as latent space is entered/encountered, its basic characteristics noted, and with a willingness to move to deeper encounter [cultural and historical components to the fore];
- the narrative-descriptive, emphasising the stories people tell to express their understandings of the land, its origins and changes [ecological and sociological components to the fore];
- the experiential, the articulation of personal encounter and one’s responses to and reflective evaluations of the landscape experience [physiological and psychological components to the fore];
- the choraphilic, teasing out the [more subjective] elements of one’s love for this place [literary-aesthetic components to the fore];
- the unitive, the sudden or developing sense of oneness with a place, as the ‘outsider’ becomes an ‘insider’, the ‘observer’ a ‘participant’
[perception of connectedness, rational or otherwise, to the fore]; and potentially,

- the epiphanic or numinous, drawing out the connecting strands between a person’s spiritual framework, the specific locale, and a particular experience whether sought or not [possibly in the apophatic-affective quadrant of the spirituality map]; here the emotional bond of the experiential and the choraphilic moves into a spiritual bond with the landscape, and ‘sense of place’ becomes ‘spirit of place’; this may or may not be expressed overtly in the language of religion or theology; and associated with any or all of the above,

- the hermeneutical, the integration and critical interpretation of encounter with place, moving from the liminality of the new experience to the consolidation of learning, its assimilation from the idiosyncratic to ‘ownership’, and some personalised version of a conviction that “God is in this place”, “This very landscape speaks to me of God”, “Here I have encountered something of the concrete meaning of Love”.

Such is the richness of this deep spiritual ecology of the individual’s encounter with place, and the simultaneous encounter of landscape with the Spirit, as “the creation waits with eager longing” [Romans 8:19, RSV].

My conclusions vis-à-vis Retreat ministry in the landscape, essentially highlight that there is no longer a justification for the dualism, geographically, of sacred and profane space; that God cannot be confined territorially but should be ‘expected to show up anywhere’ and at any time, of God’s choosing, and this is only in small part a function of our readiness and openness; that we need to be wary of using the phrase ‘holy land’, and also ‘sacred site’ [as if locus defines and confines sacrality]; that the ‘this world/other world’ dualism is also abolished in the light of the interpenetration of the Kingdom of God with this world in the Incarnate person of Christ, and the Spirit who “blows where she wills”; that sacramentality is to be ‘experienced in place’, rather than ‘locked in space’; and a recognition of the potential liminality of marginal places and experiences, as with the ‘spatial and temporal serendipity’ of encounters with the Spirit in particular places.

The locus of a Retreat is not simply about location but of focus. It is about emplaced invitation and hospitality, God’s and ours; deep listening with all our senses and spiritual imagination; the accompaniment of a prayerful anam cara on the journey without and within; an honouring of the God-given dream and expectation that this time and place of Retreat will prove a ‘thin place’, that retreatants may receive the gift of a liminal experience of the Spirit’s presence in restoration and strengthening of the whole person; and that they may encounter deeply something of the tangible meaning of “the great Love of God” in this place…and perhaps this may have elements of choraphilia, as well as find expression in worship, discipleship, and action in the world. More specifically, the prayer-work of a Retreat may be directed to the presence of the created landscape, not merely as frame or context, but as physical presence that invites reflection on the deep interweaving of human and natural histories with God’s story; that there are other profound interests and concerns to be
discerned in and through landscape than the basic human and traditional religious motifs; that human accountability within and to the environment is a part of the hermeneutic to be brought to both geographic and literary texts; and that environmental processes of evolution, adaptation and response are to be understood as interacting with the spiritual processes of observation, reflection, meditation, and resulting action [incarnatio] on behalf of the sustainability and integrity of creation. Here is a re-valuing of the earth as habitus, as God’s good creation, as well as of our engagement with the Spirit’s renewing presence in time and place.

### 6.3 Challenges and opportunities

Much has been written on the value and purposes of Christian Retreat ministry, and on the design and leadership of Retreats, including those in Protestant contemplative traditions, and with an emphasis on spiritual formational opportunities for Christian leaders. The diverse traditions and approaches to this ministry were briefly canvassed in chapter 2. Building on these and the present study, three further areas for future focus and educational development of the ministry are suggested:

(a) The visionary development of Retreat leadership in general, and in relation to the Australian social, physical and religious environment in particular: Ranson has identified a “great divide” between perceptions of church and religion in Australia, despite the profound level of search for meaning and a life-giving spirituality in the wider society. The dissonance between theology and practice, religion and spirituality, identity and placed-ness, and the growing debate about Gospel and culture, all highlight the opportunities of Retreat ministry to offer creative and engaging options for theological exploration in depth in specific “nourishing terrains”. The national as well as the individual search for identity interweaves very much with the search for a meaningful spirituality, and this ministry has a limited but focussed contribution to make to the “re-enchantment” and true “emplacement” of spiritual formation.

Related to this is the need in church and society for re-founding community on an inclusive and collaborative basis which takes seriously the experiences, traditions and hopes which bind rather than divide us. Here again, the modelling of deep listening, disciplined discernment, respectful dialogue, and prayer for people-in-place, which take context with utmost seriousness are a sine qua non of Retreat ministry.

Similarly, the incarnational theological emphasis here envisions a “well-sinking” rather than “fence-building” vision for the future development of the ministry. In farming language, the former emphasises selected “nourishing” sites, the latter emphasises “control of straying”. The metaphor suggests the development of Retreats, in situ and per agros, as an attractional and depthing experience of God-encounter and spirit-nourishment in specific landscape settings, rather than the more traditional via negativa of retreat as escape [disembodied
and dis-placed] to a non-place in order to inculcate religious experience.  

(b) Comments on a future vision for the ministry raise many issues regarding the education and mentoring of retreat leaders. A plethora of formational programs and support networks are available to spiritual directors in Australia, but a Canberra-based program, Retreat Leader Formation [RLF], is the only one specifically designed for the development of retreat leadership. There is a major area of overlap between the two roles, and there are different views as to which is a sub-set of the other. However, the significance of place, including landscape, is quite crucial to the training and reflective experience of Retreat leaders for whom physical setting is inevitably a more evocative and spacious aspect of the hospitality offered over days or weeks, rather than the focussed hour or so in spiritual direction. One outcome of the present study is possible collaboration on formation course design for the existing RLF program, and also for a training network for spiritual directors. In both ministries, this study breaks new ground in its major emphasis on landscape as an element of prayer, discernment, and spiritual formation. The “power of place” is only just beginning to be recognised in spiritual direction. The course design stage is the optimal point of input, on themes of landscape as memory and presence; creation and incarnation; image of God/image of land; praying in and for the land; literally “earthing” Retreat themes in their local physical environment; incorporating reflection on landscape in the typical “Review of the day” or examen in the Retreat program; and inviting a more intentional experiencing of the two themes of “nourishing terrain” and discovering in given geographic/cultural settings the nature and implications of “the concrete meaning of God’s Love”.

One possible development would be for existing formation programs [in Melbourne, by way of example] such as Wellspring, Heart of Life, Campion, Living Well, or the Melbourne College of Divinity’s Master of Arts in Spiritual Direction [MASD], to incorporate an optional strand in Retreat Leadership, and within this, a sequence of electives allowing focus on landscape context, both ‘real’ and representational. Both the Retreat leadership emphasis and the landscape focus would need to be integrated within the overall framework. Taking the example of the broad framework for the MASD, this might have a selection of the following additional options [as shown in italics]:  

1. Theoretical foundations:  
   Psychological and Spiritual Development  
   Personality, age, gender and spirituality [in retreat leadership and spiritual direction]  
   Belonging, identity and place in human development  
   Spiritual guidance as a unique pastoral ministry  
   Code of ethics for spiritual directors and retreat leaders  
   Supervision for spiritual directors and retreat leaders  

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Spiritual Theology

Traditions of the land in Hebrew and Christian Scripture and comparative religion
Images of God, iconography and landscape
Retreat and pilgrimage traditions in Christian Spirituality
Paying attention to God: Discernment in community and in place
Incarnational theology and Ecotheology
Gospel and culture in Australia, contextual theologies
Celtic and Aboriginal spiritualities and their contributions to Christian spirituality

2. Skills training:
   - Planning and leading retreats, pilgrimage and quiet days
   - Lectio divina and contemplative prayer: praying the land
   - Tools for creative theological reflection; left brain/right brain issues [e.g. journaling, visual depiction, prose, poetry, song, clay sculpture]

3. Personal development/practicum:
   a. Electives in prayer, spiritual direction, Ignatian Spiritual Exercises [Place, place-lessness and prayer, including Composition of Place, as option]
   b. Intensive Retreat experience; experience of spiritual direction [wilderness retreats and other retreats in landscape, as option]

4. Supervised Spiritual Direction Practicum:
   - Retreat or extended spiritual direction in landscape, as option [in situ or per agros]

5. Other units.
   - Elective introductions [select two]: Landscape formation, ecology, and symbolic landscape
   - Spirituality and Australian literature of landscape
   - Spirituality, Australian visual arts, and landscape
   - Spirituality and Australian music/lyrics of the land

6. Clinical Research Project
   - Thesis supervision and required courses [Identity Integration Group; Clinical Research Project Group] Retreat or pilgrimage in landscape, as an option.

Realistically, only a very few of the above suggested units or electives could be incorporated in the MASD, or offered as options in an MA in Spirituality, or in other non-degree but accredited courses for spiritual directors. However, they illustrate the potential application of some of the material canvassed in this study for the formation of retreat leaders literally committed to extra mural retreats. On the other hand, the suggested units could be developed into a separate specialised graduate diploma, or simply an in-service course for accredited and practising Retreat leaders under supervision.
Areas of further research that come to the fore from this study include first, the application of the themes and learnings here to other major landscape realms, such as mountains, the bush, high plains, islands, the microcosm of parks and gardens, and the different landscapes of villages, towns and cities. Second, there is much scope for an exploration of the interface with wilderness adventure, eco-tourism, and bush adventure therapy, with a specific interest in the spiritual formational possibilities for participants not overtly seeking this element of the experience. Third, a deeper investigation of notions of symbolic landscape and Australian applications of writings on the ‘iconography of landscape’ and ‘axioms for the study of sacred place’, and how these may contribute to the development of eco-theological thinking [and lifestyle] in this country. Ongoing dialogue and theological reflection on Aboriginal Christian insights will be an important part of this process. Fourth, with the emphasis here that landscape is a cultural and aesthetic construct as well as a geographic one, connections need to be made with Australian writing on Gospel and culture, especially given the multi-cultural nature of our society. Dialogue with Orthodox theological thinking in Australia, with their strong emphasis on creation as sacrament, would be a stimulating development, as would connections with Jewish and Islamic thought on the subject. And fifth, a relatively new research methodology of Participatory Action Research [PAR] suggests many stimulating possibilities for research encompassing the whole process of planning, implementing and evaluating Retreat ministry, one which has as its focus attention to God-encounters in the Australian landscape. Links could be made here between eco-theological framing, participant-observation and focus group methodologies, and environmental action for the sake of the landscape.

Conclusion

Epiphanies, encounters and engagements with the Holy Spirit, the living presence of Christ with us, occur only at particular times and in specific places. The Emmaus road and Damascus road are biblical models of the ‘where’ of such epiphanies, and profound illustrations of what is concretely possible in the spiritual life. “Coming, ready or not”, as the cry goes up in the children’s game of hiding and seeking in some local landscape setting.

There is an inseparability between journey and emplacement, encounter and revelation, spiritual formation and lived missional response: “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy” to share the good news that Christ was risen. In prayer and praise, in lives poured out in loving service, teaching and healing, here was the disciples’ lived response to “[re]discovering the concrete meaning of Love” in places of their particular lives.

Retreat ministry in the landscapes of Australia is all about deepening faith in this God who “so loved the world, that he gave his only son” Or as RS Thomas’ poem “The coming” has it, when God showed the son a small globe with “a scorched land of fierce colour” and a waiting people, the son said “Let me go there”. A Retreat is a graced time and place for this encounter with
God’s amazing, unconditional and emplaced love. Another poet, TS Eliot, is also clear about the specifics of place in his encounter with the “dove descending” Spirit he too names as Love:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The “drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling” are to me Eliot’s version of James McAuley’s invocation to the “Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives”, to raise up contemplatives, people of ceaseless prayer, to “set pools of silence in this thirsty land”, to move us beyond “an evanescent sense of questioning” to a deeply lived response in “outward works of grace”. Retreat ministry in the Australian landscape has this awesome responsibility, and one that is only possible because of whose voice it is, whose calling it is, whose Love it is we encounter in this thirsty land.
Endnotes: Chapter 6


4 See for example the depiction of this icon, and its discussion, in Henri Nouwen, 1987, *Behold the beauty of the Lord: Praying with icons*, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dam, Indiana.


7 See Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974/1990, *op. cit.*. The earliest use of the term of which I am aware is in Gaston Bachelard, 1994 [first published in French in 1958], *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston, xxxv.

8 For ideas concerning a “naming practice that decolonises the mind and generates meaningful, dialogical names [as] part of recovering a meaningful relationship to the land”, see Val Plumwood, 2002, “Decolonising relationships with nature”, *PAN* [Philosophy, Activism, Nature], Melbourne, 2, 7-30.


11 This is by no means to denigrate the appropriateness of indigenous peoples framing their own myths and cultures as earthed in particular locations and landscapes; the notion of Aboriginal Dreaming is helping other Australians re-frame their understanding of and responses to this land.


14 This metaphor has been stated in an Australian missional context in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, 2004, *The shape of things to come: Innovation and mission for the 21st century church*, Hendrickson/Strand, Erina, NSW, 47ff.

15 Retreat Leaders Formation, an ecumenical educational ministry of Barnabas Ministries Inc., Canberra, Director Rev Dr Ross Kingham; the writer is a Consultant to Barnabas Ministries, and Retreat leader for its Kaltara Retreat program for clergy in several states.


18 See for example Anita Pryor, 2003, “The Outdoor Experience Program: Wilderness journeys for improved relationship with self, others and healthy adventure”, in Kaye Richards and Barbara Smith [eds.], *Therapy within adventure*, Augsburg;

The principles of PAR are active participation by the researcher; collaboration in shared control/ownership of the process; participant empowerment; increased knowledge; and social/psychological change. See for example DJ Greenwood and M. Levin, 1998, *Introduction to action research*, Sage, London; website: [http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arphome.html](http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arphome.html) with links to specific methodologies and bibliographies.


Appendix

Chapter 3 Appendices

Appendix 3.1 Transitional phases and the Retreat process

The following table is much adapted from a three-page tabulation by Robert Moore which he calls “The archetype of initiation”;¹ Peck’s phases and some possible characteristics of the Retreat setting have been added.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase one</th>
<th>Phase two</th>
<th>Phase three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A van Gennep</td>
<td>separation</td>
<td>incorporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E &amp; V Turner</td>
<td>preliminal</td>
<td>liminal; communitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS Peck</td>
<td>pseudo-community</td>
<td>chaos; emptiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life event</td>
<td>crisis e.g. death</td>
<td>grief process, losses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>re-integration, adaptation to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship event</td>
<td>enter sanctuary,</td>
<td>sacred time/space,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>call to worship,</td>
<td>confession, encounter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>invocation</td>
<td>with transcendent,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>united with community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat</td>
<td>enter Retreat</td>
<td>benediction, recessional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hospitality,</td>
<td>exit from sanctuary,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>landscape setting,</td>
<td>re-entry into daily life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>psychological &amp;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>spiritual space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>engage in prayer,</td>
<td>integration of Retreat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>theological reflection,</td>
<td>experience with faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>discernment,</td>
<td>journey,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>encounter with God</td>
<td>incarnation of one’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>discerned commitments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² Adapted from Peck, M.S. (2000). Introduction to the Discipline of Spiritual Formation.
Appendix 3.2  Classifications of pilgrimage

Victor and Edith Turner offer a broad classification of pilgrimages:

1) the prototypical, established by the founder or great saint [e.g. to Jerusalem and Rome];
2) the archaic, deriving from an earlier devotion and with syncretic features [e.g. Glastonbury in Somerset, Croagh Patrick in Ireland];
3) the medieval, from 500-1400AD [e.g. Compostela in Spain, Chartres in France, Assisi in Italy]; we note that the Reformation was marked by the end of pilgrimage and the despoliation of shrines, cult images and relics in many parts of western Europe: the counter-Reformation saw a recognition and ending of abuses, then new growth of the practice, especially with Spanish colonisation in the New World;
4) the relatively modern, highly devotional in tone, which form “an important part of the apologetics deployed against the advancing secularization of the post-Darwinian world” — they are often `post-modern’ in asserting miraculous visions.

Since the Turners’ work was published in 1978, we may now add:
5) the renaissance of Christian pilgrimage in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, perhaps in part as a manifestation of the contemporary search for spiritual meaning beyond the institutional ‘walls’ of the church, yet paradoxically involving a return to an apparently traditional ritual process and traditional destinations. I was resident in the Taize community in France in 1991 when a large group of pilgrims arrived by bus from East Germany ---made possible by the pulling down of the Berlin wall, as well as by modern transport and the political easing of boundary-crossing.

Drawing on their historic and contemporary anthropological studies, the Turners reaffirmed the applicability of van Gennep’s and their own work on rites and ritual processes as central to the understanding of the dynamics of pilgrimage [see table below]. Other typologies have attended to:

(a) the distinction between pilgrimage and tourism and conflicting metaphors for the Christian journey;
(b) the distinguishing semantics of the literal pilgrimage [physical journey to a holy place], the allegorical pilgrimage [life as journey from a temporary abode on earth to ‘home’ in the next world], and the spiritual pilgrimage where the outer physical movement is always secondary to the inner journey: depth, not distance, is the goal; all three meanings have in common, as Richard Niebuhr puts it, “the irresistible conviction, that we acquire ourselves not in abiding only, but in moving”,
(c) the objectives of the pilgrimage, as Redeeming [seeking salvation], Therapeutic [seeking cure/miracle], or Mystical [seeking revelation/presence], with the latter being closer to our present concerns with pilgrimage as a “Retreat, across landscape, seeking to attend to God’s presence”; 
(d) the motivation of pilgrims: to request a favour, to offer thanks, to fulfil a vow, to express penitence, to meet an obligation, or to gain merit and salvation; In The archetype of pilgrimage, Clift & Clift have no less than 15 categories of motivation as to “Why people go”, and
(e) the geographic characteristics of the pilgrimage: length of journey, frequency of pilgrimage event, pilgrimage route, and of lesser importance, location of destination, importance of the place of pilgrimage, motivation of pilgrims, and characteristics of the pilgrims.
### Appendix 3.3 Retreat/pilgrimage/spiritual formation phases: A summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Phase 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase of passage</strong></td>
<td>Preparation for departure</td>
<td>Separation in departure</td>
<td>Liminal or marginal</td>
<td>Incorporation or aggregation of the sacred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[van Gennep, Turners, now phases 2-4]</td>
<td>Common sense</td>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Interiority</td>
<td>Transcendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key realm</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Lonergan]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Locus</strong></td>
<td>‘Home’</td>
<td>Wilderness, <em>terra incognita</em></td>
<td>Sacred space, holy place/s</td>
<td>Festive place, or home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic &amp; social movement</strong></td>
<td>Life pattern being de-structured</td>
<td>Detachment, anonymity, constant mobility</td>
<td>Journey, communitas developed</td>
<td>Settle at destination, move on, or home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Disengaging from the familiar</td>
<td>Journey both solitary &amp; shared</td>
<td>Encounter, enhanced motivation</td>
<td>Celebration, then disengagement for next phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Movement in self-identity</strong></td>
<td>Initial self-identity stable, excitement of quest</td>
<td>Rejection or negation of initial identity</td>
<td>Self-identity being renegotiated ‘on the move’</td>
<td>Assumes identity desired from the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Valorisation, ‘emotional mobilisation’</strong></td>
<td>Intrinsic reinforcement e.g. desire for novelty, personal causation, or ego-transcendence</td>
<td>Risk, danger, curiosity, testing difficulties faced, learning to cope</td>
<td>Openness, competence, achievement, transformation</td>
<td>Accomplishment rewarded in self, &amp; by others; What next ?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3.4  Some characteristics of the apophatic and kataphatic spectrum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apophatic</th>
<th>Kataphatic</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate placelessness of God-encounters</td>
<td>Essential placed-ness of God-encounters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermeneutic of suspicion in experience – dis-placement</td>
<td>Hermeneutic of attention/retrieval in experience – em-placement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to contain the mystery of encounter</td>
<td>Celebrating the power of encounter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticising inadequacy/inappropriateness of image</td>
<td>Delighting in image, rootedness of imagination in our being created in the image/imagination of God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong critique of imagination itself</td>
<td>Discerning God’s presence in the “thisness” of particular places</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discerning God’s presence as always beyond place and time and our attempts to describe darkness and cloud more likely to signal encounter</td>
<td>Light, colour and texture of place important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious of the data of the senses</td>
<td>Fosters the use of the 5 senses in the (re)construction of place (e.g. Ignatian Spiritual Exercises)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of critical insight in “deconstructing” every imagined place we (might) seek to enter, prophetic judgement demands image-lessness</td>
<td>Importance of imagination in “constructing” every place we enter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deus absconditus – God is free, inaccessible, unbounded, access never guaranteed</td>
<td>Deus incarnatus – God is accessible in the places of our lives and we rightly look for this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insignificance of place to Christian spirituality</td>
<td>Importance of place in Christian spirituality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting point: we can’t comprehend the numinous, experience of presence is solely of God’s making</td>
<td>Starting point: we are drawn to experience/reflect on the numinous, metaphor &amp; image important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values the natural world but it is never an adequate way of apprehending the mystery of God</td>
<td>Values biblical and historical evidence understood as “em-placing” the experience of the divine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandonment and stripping of concreteness of image</td>
<td>Embrace of image, metaphor, analogy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of subjectivity of experience of God</td>
<td>Celebration of intersubjectivity of experience of God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4.1 Geological background, Australian continent and coastline

What is now the island-continent of Australia was once part of a supercontinent known as Pangea ['all lands'] This broke apart to form Laurasia in the north, and Gondwana, including Australia and Antarctica, to the south. In a further stage, what were to become India, Africa, South America and New Zealand broke off from Gondwana and slowly drifted north, and perhaps 50 million years later, Australia and New Guinea did likewise, but failed to reach the structure which now constitutes the peninsula/island chain from Indochina through Malaysia and Indonesia to Timor. The two vast “rafts” of Sunda [northern] and Sahul [southern, Australia-New Guinea] remained separated by a deep ocean channel and zoologist Wallace found in the nineteenth century that this was also a significant divide between biota.

In contrast to some other regions of the world, Australia “settled” into relative stability, geologically, with three distinctive tectonic regions:

- the Western Shield [much of WA, NT and SA], a resistant mass or craton of crystalline rocks weathered into the form of a vast tableland; some rocks over 3,000 million years old, and much of the landform is over 600 million years old; the Nullarbor Plain is an uplifted limestone seafloor of Miocene age, about 25 million years.
- The Eastern Highlands [also known as the Tasman Fold Belt; eastern margins of Qld, NSW, Vic and Tas], built of thick sequences of sedimentary rock deposited in a huge trough or geosyncline and subsequently compressed, folded, faulted and subjected to volcanic activity -- an overall process known as orogenesis or mountain-building, with highest remnants at Mt Kosciusko, now weathered down to 2,228 metres. Strong erosion of the uplifted and folded belt has created rugged hills and escarpments with high waterfalls.
- The Central Lowlands, an extensive platform inland to the west of the Highlands; these are underlain by relatively young sediments, resting on a basement of crystalline rocks which are a subterranean extension of the Shield. There are numerous ranges [Macdonnel, Musgrave], the Uluru monolith still standing out in an uplifted and deeply eroded plain, and in SA up/down movements of blocks have created the Mt Lofty and Flinders Ranges, and conversely Spencer Gulf and the lower Murray plains.

This three-fold subdivision is of course an oversimplification, with many regional and more local variations in landforms within each. Drainage patterns strongly reflect the tectonic systems, influencing the western flow of the Carpentaria, Eyre and Murray Basins, and the eastern flow of shorter, faster rivers on the east side of the Highlands.

The present-day coastal topography of Australia is thus the outcome of millions of years of sedimentation, volcanism, faulting and uplift/subsidence, and prolonged erosion. In the Permian era, about 290 million years ago, much of the continent was under a vast ice cap, and after the ice melted, parts of the land subsided and were covered with sediment such as the Great Artesian Basin. By Cretaceous times, 140 million years ago, Australia was a flat and low land mass which, with a major rise in sea levels from the ice-melt, was inundated and divided into three land masses. In the Tertiary period, starting about 70 million years ago, sedimentation created our sources of coal, the
Eastern Highlands were uplifted, and volcanoes were erupting in Eastern Australia, some the size of Vesuvius, and creating huge lava plains; Mt Gambier was active till about 6,000 years ago, and is part of Aboriginal oral history/myth, and Big Ben on Heard Island was active as recently as 1987. Between 55-10 million years ago, the plate of Australia drifted north away from Antarctica, and aridity set in for much of the land mass when it reached its present latitude. The recent several million years are notable for the Quaternary Ice Age, with something like 20 glacial and inter-glacial periods, the last glacial terminating about 10,000 years ago, with vestiges remaining in Tasmania and Mt Kosciusko. During the last ice age, the sea level dropped by over 100 metres, and rivers cut deeply into what were later to become flooded valleys, such as Port Philip Bay and Sydney Harbour.

Geological time scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Million years ago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palaeozoic</td>
<td>Permian</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carboniferous</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Devonian</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silurian</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ordovician</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cambrian</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesozoic</td>
<td>Cretaceous</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jurassic</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Triassic</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cainozoic</td>
<td>Quaternary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix 4.2 The Australian coastline: Illustrative paintings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian Artist</th>
<th>Coastline painting title</th>
<th>Source of image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Glover, 1767-1849</td>
<td>A view between the Swan River &amp; King George’e Sound Castle Rock, Cape Schank</td>
<td>Sublime, 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugen von Guerard, 1811-1901</td>
<td>Mount Martha from Dromana’s hill</td>
<td>Beside the seaside, 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Buvelot, 1814-1888</td>
<td>Moyes Bay, Beaumaris Brighton Beach</td>
<td>Golden summers, 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred McCubbin, 1855-1917</td>
<td>The sunny south</td>
<td>Fred McCubbin, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Roberts, 1856- ??</td>
<td>Slumbering sea, Mentone</td>
<td>Golden Summers, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Phillips Fox, 1865-1915</td>
<td>Bathing hour</td>
<td>Beside the seaside, 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Streeton, 1867-1943</td>
<td>Near Streeton’s camp at Sirius Cove</td>
<td>Golden summers 157, &amp; Arthur Streeton, 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Conder, 1868-1909</td>
<td>McMahon’s Point Ferry</td>
<td>Arthur Streeton, 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Meere, 1890-1961</td>
<td>A holiday at Mentone</td>
<td>Golden summers 96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Murch, 1902-??</td>
<td>On the beach</td>
<td>Beside the seaside, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Nolan, 1917-??</td>
<td>Fraser Island; Mrs Fraser</td>
<td>Heritage of Australian art, 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifton Pugh, 1924-??</td>
<td>Seafront, Broome</td>
<td>Heritage of Australian art, 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Purceval, 1923-??</td>
<td>Christmas eve [nativity on Port Philip Bay]</td>
<td>Article only, John Collins, 1992, Compass, 26, Winter, 17-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard French, 1928-??</td>
<td>Third day of creation</td>
<td>Images of religion, 166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brett Whiteley, mid/late C20</td>
<td>Thebe’s revenge [&amp; others]</td>
<td>Brett Whiteley: Art and life, Chapter 9, “Waves” series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Amor, mid/late C20</td>
<td>Leaving the islands, Bass Strait</td>
<td>Rick Amor: The sea, MPRG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Wolhagen, mid/late C20</td>
<td>Archipelago</td>
<td>Queen Victoria Museum &amp; Art Gallery, Launceston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Gurney, mid/late C20 &amp; other Bayside City artists</td>
<td>Red Bluff [and others; various artists]</td>
<td>Bayside City Coastal Art Trail, [38 boards along 17kms trail]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See sources indicated in footnote below.
Chapter 5 Appendices

Appendix 5.1 The desert: Illustrative resources

Film:
“Walkabout”, 1971 [DVD]
“The tracker”, 2002 [DVD & CD]
“Rabbit proof fence”, 2002 [DVD and book]
“Japanese story”, 2003 [DVD]
Australian cinema after Mabo, 2004 [book] 14

Radio National, transcripts from “The spirit of things”, producer Rachael Kohn:
“Inspired landscapes” 15
“The sacred site” 16

Fiction/memoir:
Patrick White, Voss 17
Jill Ker Conway, The road from Coorain 18
Thomas Keneally, Woman of the inner sea 19
Randolph Stow, To the islands, Tourmaline 20
Susan Elderkin, The voices 21
Kim Mahood, Craft for a dry lake: A memoir 22
Alex Miller, Journey to the stone country 23

Poetry:
Selected poems quoted with commentary in Suzanne Falkiner, Wilderness: 24

Appendix 5.2: The river: Biblical and literary resources

Four different terms are used, the first three in Old Testament:

[a] *nahar*  
- dry in summer, raging torrent in rainy season
- used 120 time, regular word for river in Hebrew,
- often of the Euphrates, Gen 15:18, Deut 1:7
- Gen 2:10, Num 24:6; other particular rivers: Eden Gen 2:10,13f,
- Ethiopia Is 18:1, Damascus 2 Kgs 5:12
- Rock struck by Moses produced water Ps 105:41

[b] *nahal*  
- common for wadi or torrent valley e.g. Jabbok
- Deut 2:37, Lev 11:9; in RSV = valley Gen 26:19,
- Deut 2:36

[c] *YeOr*  
- frequently designates the Nile and its tributaries [Egyptian loan word ?] Gen 41:1, Ex 1:22

[d] *potamos*  
- Greek as used in LXX for above terms and in New Testament
- Jordan Mk 1:5, Jn 7:38, Rev 8:10
- Euphrates Rev 16:12,
- River issuing from God’s throne Rev 22:1f
- Holy Spirit = “living water” John 7:38f

Rivers serve many roles:
- Geographical boundaries Josh 1:4, Judges 4:13, 1 Kgs 4:11
- Irrigation, crops very dependent on rains Gen 2:10
- Many cisterns & dams built e.g. Masada, by Herod the Great
- 2 Chron 26:10, Neh 9:25
- springs & streams e.g. Kishon, Jabbok, wadi Kufrinjeh, wadi Zerqa, Jordan
- Bathing Ex 2:5, fill mikvehs for ritual cleansing outside the temple
- Transportation Is 18:2
- Defence Nahum 3:8
- Drinking Jer 2:18, Ex 7:18
- Fishing Lev 11:9
- Healing 2 Kgs 5:10
- Places of theophany [fluviophany?] Gen 32:22f
- Baptism Mt 3:6,
  - I Peter 3:20, 1 Cor 10:2 [Flood & Exodus as types of Xn baptism]
- Christ’s Passion as a baptism Mk 10:35-42, Lk 12:50,
  - cf Ps 69:1
- Prayer Acts 16:13

Rivers as metaphors:
- Prosperity of region over which God’s power extends Num 24:6,
  - Ps 65:9,
  - Is 66:12; prosperity of the saints Ps 1:3
- Drying up of a river = symbol of tragedy Job 14:11, Is 19:5
- Righteousness = perennial stream Amos 5:24
- God’s blessing = river of the water of life rev 22:1
- Eden Gen 2:10ff, and the Temple in the new age *nahal* Ezek 47:1-2,
  - Zech 14:8, Rev 22:1-2
- Holy Spirit cf John 7:38f, Rev 12:15
- Affliction Ps 124:4
- ? Christ Is 32:1f
- God’s presence Is 33:21
Peace Is 66:12
Pride of nations Is 66:12 nahal
Egyptian invasion Jer 46:7f
Strength of invader, foe Jer 47:2, Ps 124:4

Typology of waters:

1. of destruction:
   - Flood = God’s judgement [sinners] & God’s salvation [Remnant]
     Gen 6-8, 1 Pet 3:20
   - = complementary aspects of each stage of revelation
     Ex 15:5f Pharaoh’s host cast in the waters, Israel saved by the waters
     Ps 106:11, 78:13 psalmist’s theme – God leads people through
     the depths & waters cover adversaries = sign of God’s covenant choice
     Josh 24:6f, Jer 47:2-7 Philistines, Is 8:5-8 Israel herself warned of judgement
   - Amos 5:24 “let judgement roll down as water and righteousness as a perennial
     stream” [Martin Luther King’s theme, 1961]
   - Is 54:9 God will remember the Flood & the promises to Noah
     even in judgement

2. of cleansing:
   - very important for Hebrew ritual purification, symbolism most developed in Lev 14ff; Ex
     30:8, 1 Kgs 7:23ff
   - However, the prophets constantly reminding that the real cleansing was inward removal
     of spiritual defilement
     e.g. Ezek 16–Israel washed & adopted by God,
     from orphan⇒ heir
     Is 1:16, Ps 51:7, Ezek 36:25, 47:1ff, Joel 3:18, Zech 13:1, 14:8, cf Ps 46:4
   - NT theme –from God’s very presence
     --fulfilment of prophecies in outpouring of the Spirit, on the
     Messiah, and on the New Israel
     --Spiritual baptism takes the place of John the Baptist’s
     water baptism in the Jordan’s waters to seal and symbolise the
     repentance and hope of those who await God’s kingdom
     Mk 1:4-8, cf 1:8-10
     --“reversal”: out of baptised Christian will flow living waters
     Jn 7:37
     --water remains important symbol & metaphor
     Acts 8:26 Philip & Ethiopian eunuch
     Jn 3 discourse with Nicodemus links water and spirit =
     Earthly symbol & heavenly reality in a
     “sacramental knot”
     Heb 10:22 body washed as sign of heart-cleansing
     Eph 5:26 Christ’s cleansing of the church [?] as Israel
     Titus 3:5 washing of regeneration & renewing of the
     Holy Spirit

3. waters to drink:
   - Here again, the history of Israel provides the outward symbol for later
     theology: OT God provides water for people in the desert
     Ex 17, Ps 78:13, 20 from a rock
   - Israel remembers this sign of covenant Deut 8:15f
   - God as Shepherd of Israel will provide the rivers of water they need
     Ps 23:2
   - God is the fountain of living water Jer 2:13, Ps 36:8f
   - Israel forsakes God’s provision & cannot meet own needs for water
     in broken cisterns Jer 2:13, 17:13 ⇒ judgement, waters of affliction
     Is 30:20, Jer 8:15, and “not a thirst for water but of hearing

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the words of the Lord” Amos 8:11
Beyond judgement lies salvation & waters to quench thirst
Is 12:3, 44:3, 49:10, 55:1f
NT takes up the theme and declares it fulfilled;
Jn 4:11,14 Samaritan woman
  Christ can provide the never-failing water cf the well
  Rev 7:17, 21:5 final quenching of Israel’s thirst when the
  lamb will guide people to gushing rivers of life
  1 Cor 10:1ff Christ the Rock whence Christians now receive
  the waters in the desert of this world

4. **waters of fruitfulness & refreshment**
Waters as sign of God’s good pleasure
Restoration of God’s people after the Exile
OT: Is 35 “glowing sand shall become a pool in the wilderness”,
  41:7ff
  Is 43:19ff, 27:2 i.e. rivers of water = imagery of spiritual
  fruitfulness
  Is 58:9-14, 31:10-14
NT: Day of Israel’s fruitfulness has arrived
  God is now watering the garden thro agents of the Kingdom
  I Cor 3:6-8
Rivers of life water the City of God & the Tree of Life
flourishes on its banks Rev 22:5
The image of rivers/waters conveys strongly the thought of God’s activity
in the world through the Holy Spirit who as living river of water
~~cleanses
~~quenches thirst
~~refreshes
~~physically yes, spiritually ever more so.
Appendix 5.3 The river: resources for reflection in film and literature

“A river runs through it” [DVD, set in Montana]
“Main stream Melbourne: The River Yarra on film”, 2004 [Video, includes Tim Burstall’s short film “The prize”]
Ian Clark & Toby Heydon, A bend in the Yarra [natural history and Aboriginal presence; Merri Creek environs] 26
Tim Bonyhady, The colonial earth “The flood in the Darling” [ch.10, including ‘Praying for rain’; essay, paintings, poetry] 27
Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths [eds.], Words for country [chs 3 & 5 on Murray-Darling Basin] 28
Richard Flanagan, Death of a river guide [novel set on the Franklin River, Tasmania] 30
Tim Winton, Cloudstreet [novel set on the river at Perth] 31
Jean Sietzema-Dickson [ed.], Water of life [reflective poems] 32
Bruce Prewer & Ian Morris, Kakadu reflections [poetry and photographic images] 33
Les Murray [ed.], Anthology of Australian religious poetry 34
Les Murray, Collected poems 1961-2002 35
John Kinsella, Flexmore Hudson, poems on drought 36
Rowland Croucher [ed.], Rivers in the desert [meditations and prayers] 37
Endnotes: Appendix

1 Robert Moore, 2001, *The archetype of initiation: Sacred space, ritual process, and personal transformation*, Xlibris Corporation [no location given], 94ff..
5 Webb, op. cit., xvi, and more detail 17-19.
8 Richard Niebuhr, 1984, “Pilgrims and places”, *Parabola*, 9, 3, August, 10.
12 Stoddard, op cit., 57.

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13 Sources of artistic images in order listed in table [Appendix 4.1]

| Beside the seaside, 97 | see above Golden Summers, 69 |
| Golden summers 157 | see above |

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<th>Title</th>
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<td>Arthur Streeton, 34</td>
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<td>Golden summers 96</td>
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<td>Golden summers, 101</td>
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<td>Arthur Boyd, 14f; 6</td>
<td>Rodney James, 2001</td>
<td>Arthur Boyd: The emerging artist, Mornington Peninsula and Port Phillip Bay, Mornington Peninsula Regional Art Gallery, Mornington [see web site above]</td>
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<td>Heritage of Australian art,60</td>
<td>see above</td>
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<td>Article only, John Collins, 1992</td>
<td>Compass, 26, Winter, 17-21</td>
<td>q.v.</td>
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<td>Images of religion, 166</td>
<td>Rosemary Crumlin, 1989</td>
<td>Images of religion in Australian art, Bay Books, Kensington, NSW.</td>
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<td>Bayside City Coastal Art Trail,</td>
<td>See article by Claire Miller, “Art trail proves to be shore draw”, Sunday Age, 2 January, 2005 [includes photograph, and sketch map of art trail from Brighton to Ricketts Point, Mornington Peninsula; [38 boards along 17 km trail]</td>
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16 Rachael Kohn, 2002, “Australia’s sacred sites”, Radio National’s *The spirit of things*, Sundays 15 September to 27 October, including Uluru-KataTjuta, the Australian War Memorial, Melbourne Cricket Ground, St Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral, Melbourne, Byron Bay: [www.abc.net.au/religion/features/sacredsite/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/features/sacredsite/default.htm)


18 Jill Ker Conway, 1992, *The road from Coorain*, Minerva, Sydney [surviving drought and dust storms]


Susan Elderkin, 2004, *The voices* [British author writing on the Kimberley region of WA evokes spirit of place, while tackling difficult issues of metaphysical ties to the land, cultural destruction and inter-racial relationships; reviewed in *The Melbourne Age*, 17/7/04: positive, & *The Weekend Australian*, 17/7/04 : negative].

Kim Mahood, 2000, *Craft for a dry lake: A memoir*, Anchor, Sydney [a personal journey to a woman’s heartland, to recover a sense of place where she grew up in the Tanami desert; explores inner/outer journeys, identity and family ties, grief at a tragic father’s death, black/white relations; reviewed by Kate Llewellyn, 2000, *Eureka Street*, October, 36-37].

Alex Miller, 2002, *Journey to the stone country*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney [set in outback Queensland, a remote and rocky country that mirrors an ‘unvisited place’ within each of us, and where white Annabelle and Jangga Aboriginal Bo test their future together in both the heartland and the land of the heart]. For interview with the author about this book, see [www.abc.net.au/arts/books/stories/s842488.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/books/stories/s842488.htm) A critique is available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) by following links to the book title and/or author; reviewed by Steven Reynolds 18/7/2004.

Suzanne Falkiner, *op.cit.*, passim [page numbers indicated in text].


Falkiner, *op. cit.*, 220-231, and passim.


Les Murray, *op. cit.*, passim; e.g. Ian Mudie, “They’ll tell you about me”, 53ff; Louis Lavater, “The barrier”, 244f; Alan Gould, “The Henty river”, 264.


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